

Left Alone

The Role of Isolation in Three Novels by J.M. Coetzee

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*“It is not speech that makes man man,
but the speech of others.”*
-Magda

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Introduction

In 1910, the Cape and Natal colonies and the Republics of the Orange Free State and the Transvaal joined together to become the Union of South Africa, combining a huge population of different ethnicities under a single flag, within a single set of borders, under one government.

They were not under the same rule, however. The Union was considered a British dominion until 1931, and shortly afterward there was great political strife over whether to follow the United Kingdom into World War II as an ally, enemy, or not at all. Three years after the Union became a reality, the largest population, a significant indigenous majority, was given only a sliver of territory, and came to be governed under special rules, ones that became increasingly separated from those governing their countrymen (MacKinnon, pp. 183-190). This initial union was plagued by vast differences and separations that, while not irreconcilable, were not going to be, as the only group able to effect change were those that benefit most from the system.

The Boer Wars were less than ten years old at the time of union. Staged between 1899 and 1902, these conflicts represented to the Boers the cruelty of the British. They saw theirs as a struggle for freedom and independence from the colonization of the Queen's all-powerful empire. What they saw as their own land was being controlled by the British for British interests. Ironically, this exact complaint was what could be lodged against the Boers themselves, having colonized the south of Africa centuries earlier from the dominant Zulu, Xhosa, Khoi, and San peoples (among others) who, by the time of union, had lost most of their land, their property, and their rights.

By the post-World War period, the ruling apartheid government was in what J.M. Coetzee has referred to as the 'utopia phase', where “the men who held political power believed they could build a wall around the country to isolate and insulate it from the world” (“Nobel Laureate”). Not only did they try to lock the world out, but the ruling class attempted to create the culture within as they saw fit, promoting what were perceived to be non-critical to the state, and exclude all they deemed 'undesirable' whether it be seditious or morally corrupted material, promotion of unapproved values, or criticism of any weight or merit of the whites and the government. This silencing of opinions quickly gave way to censorship, which began to pervade many aspects of life, more than the culture of letters that was developing in the country at the time.

Essentially, the state took to heart the separations that already existed within the society they

began to rule after the elections of 1948, and as the Afrikaner ruling party passed more and more legislation that consolidated their power, the incessant racial classification practiced by the government insured that there was an attempt to allow the separate races, as they saw them, to be kept apart to develop independently (Beck, pp. 111, 125-126, 131-132, 136; MacKinnon, pp. 212-13; Lester, Nel, and Binns, p. 172). The whites were kept in the most affluent parts of the country, while what they perceived as “lesser races” were sequestered to their own poor, destitute, underdeveloped and underfunded slums, allowed into the white parts of the country only to serve. In this way, 'apart-ness' or, in the ruling class's Afrikaans, 'apartheid' became the policy through which racism was institutionalized and promoted. Numerous pieces of legislation were passed to keep the Afrikaner ruling class in possession of all political power and full rights of citizenship, while those with different colors of skin were given less and less.

This sense of separation and isolation penetrated deeply into the culture, but there were more parties with other interests than simply those determined by race. For the most part, the immigrating British and the descendants of the British saw themselves as an intellectual defendant of the old and less brutal system of colonization, and ultimately the inevitable destructors of the apartheid government. Many were the dissenting section of the ruling class which stood for the emerging post-war post-colonial mentality that aligned itself with “post-war views of the world as an open society where all people had the same basic rights regardless of race, origin, and gender” which the apartheid government's policies “flew in the face of” (MacKinnon, p. 212). These were some of the many ideas to be blocked out by the isolation of the apartheid state, in a nutshell. These dissenters were against the arrogance, the isolation and limited contact (between races and nations, as well as the ruling and the ruled), the censorship, and the degrading treatment of the perceived “lesser races,” both native and immigrant Indians and native Africans alike. It was into this pocket of society that John Coetzee was born.

Though descended from 17th century Dutch settlers and the son of two Afrikaners, Coetzee's family spoke English at home. He recounts in *Boyhood* his fear of the Afrikaner boys (though he spoke Afrikaans to them and in school) and his father losing his government job due to disagreements with the apartheid policies. All of Coetzee's novels are written in English (with one being only primarily in English) and, before his move to Australia, all question the moral authority of those in charge and almost all deal with race relations on some level, whether featured prominently or not, and with the questionable practice of speaking for another.

In his 'autre-biography' trilogy are clues to how these views developed. While Coetzee displays in the rest of *Boyhood* an inability to truly relate to all of his friends and family that may not be uncommon for a boy of that age, in *Youth* we see several times not only South Africa isolating him from the rest of the world when he is abroad, but his inability to connect to it, or to others around him. "South Africa is a wound within him," Coetzee writes, "How much longer before the wound stops bleeding?" (p. 116). He describes his fantasy of a woman, a perfect woman, as one who doesn't speak: "His hope is that from the featureless crowds amidst which he moves there will emerge a woman who will respond to his glance, glide wordlessly to his side, return with him (still wordless – what could their first word be? - it is unimaginable) to his bedsitter, make love to him, vanish into the darkness" (p. 52). What greater good could there be for young John the aspiring poet, than a woman who unlocks his verse without requiring any speech out of him, or definition of his character? He wanders the lonely streets of London, "Day after day goes by when not a word passes his lips. He begins to mark them off with an S in his diary: days of silence" (pp. 113-114). He then wonders if he can trick conversations into happening by bumping into people, the implication being that there is no other way available. In *Summertime*, this only becomes worse, as character after character, all identified by Coetzee himself as important to him, describe him as, at best, a loner: "Socially inept. Repressed, in the wider sense of the word" (p. 20).

While many factual errors intentionally exist in these books, the spirit of them is repeatedly stated to be accurate. To quote Julia from *Summertime*, "What I am telling you may not be true to the letter, but it is true to the spirit, be assured of that" (p. 32). Many of the traits we see in these texts we can see reflected throughout his oeuvre, as they are problems he struggles with as a writer and a person in the apartheid state. Reading this trilogy, one begins to see how Coetzee uses a version of himself as a metaphor for his true self. From page to page, one gets the sense that Coetzee saw within himself an inability to connect on a level deep enough to satisfy him. All attempts may have fallen short, or, taking a lesson from the poets and writers he was so fond of, he simply failed to see the way in which people could connect emotionally. Looking back to South Africa at the time of his childhood, adolescence, and early career where he developed as a writer, the times covered by this trilogy, we can see how this isolation and inability to connect occurred to many people politically, emotionally, educationally, or even verbally.

It was only after failing to attain permanent citizenship in another country that Coetzee reluctantly came back to South Africa and joined the University of Cape Town as a literature teacher.

From there, he began his career as a writer, publishing books critical of the regime while escaping censorship, and becoming a prominent figure in the literary world which concerned itself with the fight for the deconstruction of apartheid.

This position of the English-speaking intelligentsia being depicted as irrelevant to the struggle presents an interesting foundation in the apartheid structure. While they are outraged morally and intellectually by the policies of the ruling class, they are complicit physically, and not disassociated from the Afrikaner minority, regardless of their hesitations. This tension is realized in many of Coetzee's later characters, *Life & Times of Michael K*'s Medical Officer and *Age of Iron*'s Elizabeth Curren to name only two (both of which will be examined more closely in the chapters of this thesis), as they struggle to find their place within the struggle for reform, whether it has turned into a war for their country or their soul.

The censors of the apartheid state relegated books that spoke badly of the police (among other things) to South Africa's censors, under whom they were labeled as 'undesirable' and thus banned. In *Doubling the Point*, Coetzee describes this very restriction as to what led him to write so often about that very subject in several of his books (p. 300); *Iron*'s police murdering John and Bheki and inciting the Gugulethu riots, and *Life & Times*'s Captain Oosthuizen come immediately to mind, along with the Magistrate's unjust imprisonment and torture in *Waiting for the Barbarians*. My argument is that this same reaction has caused separation and isolation to be explored repeatedly and prominently in his works before the fall of the regime in 1994 (and even *Disgrace* after it, though it will not be examined in this thesis). This fundamental disconnection from neighbors, siblings, countrymen, and other parts of the world becomes the central premise and concern of the three texts that I will examine.

The Divided Pen

Coetzee himself has pointed out numerous ways in which writing creates these lacks of connection. Rather than attempt to remedy these, he acknowledges they exist, draws attention to them, prepares for them, and works with them. His novels deal not with the problem as something to be solved, but as something that may not be solvable. The Magistrate never gets to learn exactly what Joll did to the barbarian girl, for example, nor does Susan Barton ever get to learn how or why Friday lost his tongue. The Medical Officer never gets Michael's story out of him, and Magda never receives answers to her questions that she aims at Hendrik.

Roland Barthes' *To Write: An Intransitive Verb?* examines the possibility of viewing writing, the

verb, in a way that changes its meaning. The actual act of writing, Barthes conjectures, is not an active verb, but an intransitive one, which means it does not require an object. This removes a third party from the formula. Essentially, writing is turned back onto the writer, and the subject is the one affected by the action. Barthes describes the process thus: “the middle voice corresponds exactly to the modern state of the verb *to write*: to write is today to make oneself the center of the action of speech, it is to effect writing by affecting oneself, to make action and affection coincide, to leave the *scriptor* inside the writing” (p. 18). If we take this view towards Coetzee's writing, we can see his obsession with his writing, and the art of it. Being in this middle position is a mirror for the social situation: what is written becomes not only an expression of him, but an expression of what he is not. Sue Kossew refers to the concept of the in-between people of the colonial system as being “half-colonised” (p. 168). This can be extended to include Coetzee, and the entire complicit class in the apartheid system. Though they do not agree, they have no choice but to go along with the system, or overthrow it as a whole; every non-freedom fighter, every citizen not actively working towards the overthrow of the government is an accomplice in some way. We can see this in several characters: Magda, stuck between her father and Hendrik, the Magistrate between the barbarians and the Bureau, Susan Barton between the white males of Crusoe and Foe, and Friday, for example.

We can see it as more than just half-colonisation, however. Barthes looks at writing as a more dynamic verb, one that not only affects the writing, but the writer. “[I]n the modern verb of middle voice *to write*, the subject is constituted as immediately contemporary with the writing, being effected and affected by it,” Barthes writes (p. 19). It is here that we can begin to turn to the idea of agency, and of who is allowed to speak. If, as a writer, one is to write, one must have a limited amount of source material available. A writer cannot (with integrity) write from a perspective he or she cannot know (socially and culturally speaking, lest we bar Magda, Mrs. Curren, Elizabeth Costello, and Susan Barton from Coetzee's repertoire). Thus, the more a writer writes, the more he or she cements themselves into their position of who they are, what they know, and what part of the world they have access to. In *The Literature Police*, Peter D. McDonald reveals that the reason several works of Coetzee's made it through the censor was because the censors based their decisions on the impact the texts would have on the projected audience. “No content was inherently or absolutely 'undesirable', since its power to offend or threaten depended on the number and kind of readers it was likely to reach and/or on the way in which those putative readers were likely to respond to it” (p. 313). Does this mean that the books weren't accessible to any other readers? Or that the audience was comprised of only

those who already agreed with the texts or would look past their potentially seditious meaning and see them as art? Or that these intellectuals who were willing to wade through the symbols of the novel had already been of an agreeable opinion to the message contained therein, that in effect the damage was done? McDonald concludes that Coetzee's fictions "never had, nor were they intended to have, a mass appeal" (p. 314). Even though he had an international appeal early on, we can see how domestically there was not a wide readership for the message he was spreading, whether through lack of interest on the one hand or illiteracy or lack of English on the other, or even through his precise and often pessimistic literary style.

Additionally, if we look at writing in the middle voice as speaking of himself, as Coetzee and his writing are irrevocably bound together, we can see much of the struggles of the dissenting white liberal in apartheid-era South Africa. The difficulties of action, the struggle of the voiceless, and the authority of having a voice, of being able to speak, all come forward. Who can speak in this situation? Not the black population, certainly, with the limited literary culture in their indigenous languages, nor were they going to be listened to by the regime. The Indians had roughly the same position as far as the culture of letters was concerned. It was only the whites who were able to speak, not only to each other, but to the world. Not being in the same position as the oppressed majority, it is difficult to claim authority when speaking accurately of their situation. What does a person have if not their own story? "What you can say," said Coetzee, "what you can think, what you can feel are always limited and defined by the forms in which they can be expressed" (quoted in McDonald, p. 304). What a writer can feel is not only limited by the scope of writing, not even their language or their mastery of it, but of their experiences and their stories.

The issue of the voiced and voiceless also leads to other interesting areas. Nadine Gordimer's review of *Life & Times* looks at the story as a remedy for the political situation from which and into which it was written. She wonders at the relation between "private and social destiny" which she says "is distorted here more than is allowed for by the subjectivity that is in every writer", taking Michael's prescription for himself to be unsustainable on the whole, essentially trying to fit it into the narrative on the conflict and being unable to do so. She notes the "book is unusual in positing its answer while writers customarily say it is their business to only explore questions" and takes the answer the book seems to be providing, namely that "only the death of the soil is the end of life" ("Idea of Gardening"). The issue of giving voice to the voiceless, she believes, is resolved in this case but not universally; while it provides an answer rather than simply more questions, the answer is not the one she began

reading the book to find.

This attitude is not dissimilar from John's in *Age of Iron*, when he rejects Mrs. Curren's attempts to mother him and talk him out of abandoning his life, which has just started, to a cause much bigger than himself. As Gordimer wrote of Coetzee, “[s/]he does not recognize what the victims, seeing themselves as victims no longer, have done, are doing, and believe they must do for themselves”. John does not see Mrs. Curren's advice as helpful to the struggle or the regime, and neither does Gordimer of Coetzee. Coetzee himself recognizes this attitude towards his work in his South African audience, in which they look at how his books fit into the political struggle, and what value they are one way or another (Penner, p. 75). Interestingly, we can say that the books, in actuality, are, like Michael K, trying “to be out of the camps, out of all of the camps at the same time” (p. 182). As Gordimer says, Coetzee is offering an answer where it would be easy to ask a question instead: it's possible to occupy a space outside of the struggles of the voiced and voiceless. The question then becomes, what is there to be said from this position?

The Act of Rejection

The idea of isolation and social separation runs throughout Coetzee's novels. To understand this theme, and how Coetzee approaches it in his earlier work, I will look at three novels which take three very different perspectives: that of the dominant colonizing whites (the Boers), those that are stuck under the regime, disadvantaged and ignored (those with black blood), and the dissenting whites who are unwillingly caught in the system they abhor (the English intelligentsia). The characters that represent each of these positions and their place within the struggle of apartheid are, respectively, Magda from *In the Heart of the Country*, Michael K from *Life & Times of Michael K*, and Elizabeth Curren from *Age of Iron*. These are the novels that I will cover in this thesis, looking at the different ways they are shaped and affected by the system created to keep its citizens at a permanent distance from each other.

Examining studies of isolation in individuals, and how they react, we can see many parallels with Coetzee's main characters from the three novels in question. We see this in their traits, their actions, and in some cases this illuminates further what was otherwise unclear. Recently, more psychological studies are being done on social exclusion and personal rejection and the resulting effects on the victims' decisions and feelings. One interesting reaction is that of analgesia, or reduced response to pain. Researchers have recently found that “highly hurt-prone people appeared to demonstrate analgesia in response to social threats. Interestingly, this effect was not significant for individuals less

prone to hurt feelings.” (MacDonald, Kingsbury, and Shaw, 84). From this, we might look to *Michael K*, and be inclined to agree with the medical officer's curiosity at Michael's lack of appetite, “Perhaps the truth is simply that he needs to eat less than other people” (p. 144), that hunger no longer bothers him. But this could be applied towards his actions through the entire book, ignoring hunger and pain as he dodges entrapment, and not just his time at the Kenilworth camp.

There is reason to believe that Michael is sensitive to rejection, even if the narrator does not explicitly say so. In many parts of the book where Michael's feelings would be quite dominant, such as when his mother dies, the narrator skips over what is going on in his head, and lets the reader imagine for themselves. Since Michael has virtually no friends, no interactions with the opposite sex, and after a certain point no mother, and since he feels that interaction with either side of the ongoing conflict would only result in his being subjugated, we can see where he may have developed this sensitivity. His childhood, where he “sat on a blanket [...] learning to be quiet” (p. 4) and preferred to spend time by himself (p. 7), would have accommodated him to expect loneliness. If this is so, we can begin to see how all of his losses of potentially beneficial social interactions lead to his not feeling hunger. Of course, this is taken to extremes, but it does seem to anticipate scientific evidence.

Certain extreme cases can also be explained at the Kenilworth camp, for instance when Michael's body is failing him and he is fainting. Geoff MacDonald, Rachell Kingsbury, and Stephanie Shaw note, “if rejection sensitive individuals experience analgesia in response to exclusion, then the warning signal that pain provides may not be as prominent during exclusion episodes” (p. 86). The medical officer notices this in his final entry, and takes it as the unique way that Michael chose to defy those containing him,

In fact you did not resist at all. When we told you to jump, you jumped. When we told you to jump again, you jumped again. When we told you to jump a third time, however, you did not respond but collapsed in a heap; and we could all see, even the most unwilling of us, that you had failed because you had exhausted your resources in obeying us. (*Life & Times*, p. 163)

Michael never complains about his position, he just manages to get away from what he deems to be unsuitable or uncomfortable. This, the medical officer realizes, is “the originality of the resistance you offered” (*ibid.*), showing those in power the toll of their demands.

Writing about a world outlook of such affected people, Kipling Williams et. al write, “lonely, compared to non-lonely, individuals are more likely to construe their world including the behavior of others as punitive or potentially punitive” (p. 8). This is also particularly interesting, if we take Michael as a person suffering from rejection and loneliness. Though there are obviously other reasons behind it,

we can see Michael's rejection of the medical officer's and the stranger of Section III attempting to save him through this lens as well. We can see from the differences of Michael's reception to charity between the man in the track suit (p. 47) and the stranger (p. 173) that he is growing slowly more distrustful of the world. However, do we say this is a problem with Michael, or the fault of the system that continually tries to ensnare him, constantly offering help for sacrifice and submission? What is important to note is the way the system has made Michael who he is, and his separation from the people he meets is precisely the goal of the apartheid government.

A report by Wendi Gardner, Cynthia Pickett and Megan Knowles introduced a concept that can be applied to another text: that of 'social snacking' (pp. 232-236). When interaction with a very intimate relation is not available, people will tend to resort to keepsakes and photographs of their loved one to remind them of the connection that they share. We can see a part of this in *Age of Iron*, in Elizabeth Curren's discussion of her letter to her daughter, when she says, "To whom this writing then? The answer: to you but not to you; to me; to you in me" (p. 5). It requires no proof to note that she misses her daughter who lives in America, this is one way to explain the things she says. What's interesting is how she confesses to her daughter in her letter and (at least initially) has significant difficulty in doing so to anyone else. She has to manage the gap between herself and Vercueil that not only the whites but her colored housekeeper Florence and Florence's revolutionary son Bheki seem to want maintained. The entire novel is based around this missing connection to her daughter, which, among other things, suggests her lack of comfort moving outside her established zone of intimacy. We can also see this as a double-interaction, her creating not only the dynamic image of her daughter who calls (p. 117), but the static one who is frozen in time, who is locked away inside Mrs. Curren, to whom the letter is addressed. She says this herself, "you are with me not as you are today in America, not as you were when you left, but as you are in some deeper and unchanging form" (p. 118). This second daughter is free to be what Mrs. Curren needs her to be, specifically someone unable to judge, unable to damage the possibility of a full confession which would come close to the truth. Derek Attridge notes this as well:

The longing for unmediated communication, for a physical bond to seal and perfect what is thought of as merely verbal transmission, is driven by a fantasy of total union that cannot, in fact, exist between individuals; and there is even a sense in which the distance and the necessity of written correspondence make possible for Mrs. Curren a fullness of giving, and hence of love and of living on [...]. (*Ethics and Politics*, p. 61)

The image of her daughter to whom the letter is addressed, the one kept separate, is the one that allows the confessional mode. This daughter is absent from all connection that may alter the point of the

speaking, to function, and in doing so, being fully able to express her feelings, though paradoxically: to whom?

Another researcher, Julie Fitness, looked at the worst imaginable crimes of social interaction, and we can see traces of them in some of the novels. She found that “respondents describe[d] the rejection of mothers by their children as particularly severe – ‘the hardest thing to forgive would be a daughter cutting herself off from the mother’” (p. 267). Mrs. Curren says that the letter is not to the “idea” of her daughter that is present on one end of the phone (p. 118), but the one that she holds to herself, inside herself, the one that remains unchanged, and that she can never be separated from. The connection with the daughter in America is actually growing much weaker, where Mrs. Curren says that letting her own voice rest on the word dear when she says “Goodbye, my dear” is “self-indulgence”. The letter is a way of protecting this connection, in a way where it cannot be lost before Mrs. Curren loses her life.

This same abandonment, Fitness found, was also feared the other way around: “Over 40% of respondents claimed that abandonment or desertion were the worst offenses parents could commit against their children – only sexual abuse (by fathers) was reported as the worst offense by an equally large proportion of respondents (44%)” (p. 266). We can see both of these in Magda, into whom, unsurprisingly, we can read the most psychological aberrations. She mentions the “childhood rape” (section 9, p. 4) and “I was absent. I was not missed. My father pays no attention to my absence. To my father, I have been an absence all my life” (section 6, p. 2). While the ‘childhood rape’ even Magda states as having a “kernel of truth in this fancy” (section 9, p. 4), there is another scene in which Magda describes her and her father relieving themselves in the same place (section 64, pp. 34-35). This is written in such a way, describing their excrement lying together, that even one of the censors caught onto a possible hint of incest (McDonald, 312). The forms of rejection that are commonly seen as the most grave are the ones Magda is subjected to by her father, and much of the plot of the book can be traced back to her suffering at his hands, and how she responds.

We can also read a more concrete explanation of the father's ignoring of Magda. Fitness explains that that “a single parent who holds a reservoir of hatred and anger toward a deserting partner may project that hostility onto the child in the family who most resembles that parent” (p. 271). The only clues as to the image of Magda's mother come from her imagination. On page 2, she says that “[f]rom one of the farthest oubliettes of memory I extract a faint grey image, the image of a faint grey frail gentle loving mother huddled on the floor,” though she admits this is an image “any girl in my

position would be likely to make up for herself” and refers to her mother dying “in childbirth” (sections 3 and 4, p. 2). She reveals that even this image is only a conception, and not actually based on memory, and continues to call up a scene of her death. However, if Magda particularly resembles her mother, it's reasonable to assume that her father is only ignoring her because she reminds him of a once painful memory. While he is still guilty of a quite heinous crime against his daughter (emotional abandonment), this does put a more human face on him, and we can grow to understand why the situation on the farm has grown to the shape we find it in.

The ways in which Magda reacts are unsurprising: “rejection by significant individuals and social groups triggers a variety of maladaptive reactions, including depression, suicidal behavior, and violence” (Williams et. al, p.9). We can see the depression throughout the book, from the very first page to the very last as she is rejected time and time again. Rainer Romero-Canyas and Geraldine Downey note that rejection-sensitive people were willing to do things they normally thought were wrong in order to avoid rejection (p. 145), and that “[c]hildren who angrily expected rejection were more likely to respond to cues of rejection in a hostile manner, eliciting rejection.” (p. 136). All of this we can see in her reaction to her father's infidelities with Klein-Anna. Her attempts to stop him result in rather brutal rejections. At first she is shouted at: “Now stop it! Stop irritating me! Go away!” (section 103, p. 60). Her father then turns more calm, though this can be multiple versions of the same event, where she tries repeatedly to understand how her father's anger results into her ending up back in bed. She turns to the bell, only to create another annoyance, looking for another way to interrupt her father, and “I am hit a heavy blow on the head. I smell blood, my ears ring” (section 112, p. 62). Her turn to the rifle can be read as a manifestation of the rejection she feels, rather than an actual anger at her father or an attempt to make him stop what he is doing, either sleeping with a servant or upsetting the social order.

Grabbing his attention but not his acceptance, Magda accidentally ends up killing her father. With no other recourse after he dies, she begins turning towards the only people left on the farm, Hendrik and Klein-Anna. Much of her actions can be seen as extending from her rejection by her father and the two servants, the closest people she has to friends. Williams et al. note “[the state of Rejection Sensitivity] is a defensively-motivated system that gets elicited by rejection-relevant stimuli [...] being in this defensive state triggers strenuous efforts to prevent rejection that involve over-accommodation, self-silencing, and excessive solicitousness” (p. 9). We can find clear manifestations of each of these symptoms in her later actions after the initial rape. Excessive solicitousness can be seen in her inviting

both of the servants into the house to sleep near her, giving Hendrik easier access to her (section 213, p. 119). Given this, we can also see her requesting predictable demands of Hendrick and Klein-Anna right before they desert her and the farm, and her insistence of them to see her for more than she is: “I am not simply one of the whites, I am I! I am I, not a people” (section 228, p. 128). Self-silencing is apparent throughout as she struggles with language, but especially before the initial rape, when she holds her tongue as Hendrik strips off her father's old clothes, trying to bear his taunts rather than speaking (section 196, pp. 106-107). Additionally, she refuses to discuss the rape with either of them, trying to ignore the elephant in the room. The servants conspicuously wait for her to broach the subject herself, which shows that they are taking her lead on how to handle it, which may be a lingering respect for the old forms of power.

Her acceptance and amiability towards Hendrik after the initial rape can be seen as over-accommodation, though it has been read by others as a sexual awakening (McDonald, p. 311). Williams et al. further write, “people may be able to address belongingness needs that have been threatened by exclusion by mimicking the behaviors of others, even though mimicry happens without intention, awareness, or conscious control” (p. 13). Generally, people suddenly excluded from a group will unconsciously mimic those that are included in the group to return their own inclusion. Magda turning herself into Hendrik's lover, mimicking Klein-Anna, is an example of this. In her desperation not to be alone, she attempts to find a way into their marriage, which she sees as a group excluding her in a new way that was not so apparent when her father was alive and maintaining the social structure by which they lived.

Unfortunately for her, not only is full inclusion not possible lawfully or morally; she lacks the tools to connect in the first place. Peter Trower, Bridget Bryant, and Michael Argyle, note how important the parents are as initial models of social skills for developing children (p. 38). From the above examples, we can see how well Magda's father tends to react to her. Karen Prager agrees on the importance of this: “adaptations learned earlier in development may influence intimacy in later life stages,” (p. 72), and that “loneliness is specific to intimacy or companionship deprivation. States of deprivation, if they are sufficiently frequent, persistent, or severe, exert negative effects on development” (p. 73). Much of Magda's failings in social connection can again be traced back to her father, and her early development, where she was unlikely to have had much tutelage in the first place. Her development stunted, she is only playing “catch-up” with the others as she tries to relate to them in an equally strong and non-submissive way, and create a healthy relationship as the system she has

grown up in is uncreated around her.

Through all of this we can begin to see how Coetzee uses isolation not only to develop his characters but his plots. This sort of deconstructive psychological interpretation allows us to get deeper into their heads, and see what makes them act how they do, or give them motivation, but while these views shed light on aspects of the novels, they fail to take into account the works as a whole. The actions of a character, while meaningful, can lose a lot of significance if removed from their context. Coetzee wrote these texts as complete sets of representative models for the important players of the world he was living in. Michael K's fear of the world around him can have a lot more impact if we consider the world he inhabits. This thesis aims to take a more constructive approach to these texts, taking their symbols and building out of them a larger meaning. The psychological approach is only one way to read the layers of separation, rejection, and isolation that permeate these texts. In each chapter of this thesis, I will examine a different text, and the themes within it. I will take particular note of the space Coetzee seems to explore with each of his main characters from the three texts and how they relate back to the separation and isolation posed by the regime. In the case of *In the Heart of the Country*, I will show how Magda's position underneath her father but above the servants leaves her in an impossible situation in which she is not only colonizer but subject. Additionally, after her act of patricide, I will examine the ways in which she attempts to connect to the servants and what this says about those who share her position in apartheid-era South Africa: specifically, those that are included within but are not creators of the ruling class, and what will happen to them after the inevitable fall of the system.

In *Life & Times of Michael K*, I will look at whether or not Michael offers a solution to his political situation, as Gordimer claims, or if he instead is indeed subjective in his self-imposed isolation. I will examine his struggles with time, as well as the attempts of the medical officer to re-integrate Michael into his own corner of the system, and how his perception of himself blinds him to the real situation Michael faces. Finally, I will look at the third section of the book and determine the ways in which he reinforces his own isolation, and how it offers information we can use to understand the rest of the text.

Finally, in the third chapter, I will look at the position of Elizabeth Curren in what is sometimes called Coetzee's masterpiece, *Age of Iron*, and the uniqueness of her role inside the dissenting English intelligentsia. Her attempts to stop the impending war around her are muddled by her inability to speak from a position either side can trust or allow themselves to listen to, not only as a woman, but an old

white woman, a liberal humanist. Her representation of the classical world also offers an interesting take on her situation in a more global-political sense. This inability to trust her, created by the class system of the regime, leads her to question her own identity and the value of not only her life but her death, whether public or private. Lastly this thesis will examine how she eventually overcomes these obstacles to make a final connection before her inevitable death.

While many of the books Coetzee wrote deal with issues of isolation, as noted above, I feel these books struggle with them in a particularly interesting way, giving the outsider a very detailed picture of the situation with which the author grappled. Additionally, though McDonald notes that the texts never attained a mass appeal, much within them can be seen to be talking directly to the audience that tried to incorporate them into the brewing revolution. Together, they represent some of J.M. Coetzee's most powerful work, and a valuable intellectual contribution to the struggle.

Chapter 1: *In the Heart of the Country*

In Marion Hansel's film *Dust*, the opening shot is of Magda shown with her back to the viewer, peering out over the veld, and the film begins with the line "To my father, I've been an absence all my life." The Magda character laments the lack of verbal intercourse between her and her father, and displays a slight lack of surety over whether or not they've ever spoken over the dinner table they're called to "sundown after sundown".

Though J.M. Coetzee has stated that he considers movies made from books a simplification of the source material (notably after this film was made), and the film does lack the original depth and a lot of the feeling of its novel-source *In the Heart of the Country*, this is nevertheless a good beginning to enter into the main character, Magda. Not only does Jane Birkin's Magda focus on her inability to connect with her father, but she is unable to even face the audience. In the film, even though we are the only ones listening to her, and her innermost thoughts, she begins turned away, and cannot find comfort in being listened to, needing someone else to exchange with her, give her some sort of feedback. In the book, she describes herself as "a spinster with a locked diary" (section 10, page 4), and lacks the practical tools of making a connection with anyone else. The diary is locked, her thoughts are kept away from the others around her, and she enters into a discourse with something that can never talk back to her. She rarely shares her ideas and opinions with the others, nor do they express particular interest in what she has to say. Magda is essentially a series of disconnects, in one aspect or another, which leads not only the story to its conclusion, but the reader to the themes and ideas presented within the novel.

The Father

Magda, isolated, begins the novel by retreating into herself to find meaning to her life that is unwanted by those on the farm, and specifically her father, Johannes. The indication is that this has been going on for some time. "I should have been standing ready to greet them with smiles and offers of tea," she says as her father is allegedly bringing his new bride home, "but I was not. I was absent. I was not missed. My father pays no attention to my absence. To my father I have been an absence all my life" (section 6, p. 2). Notably, she is not there to witness it, and we're left to conclude that this is actually just something she made up and feels, rather than is accurately describing. It is later revealed that the father

and his new bride are actually Hendrik and his new bride, and we can look back to this section to see what such a fantasy would tell us about Magda. First, besides her unreliable narration, her earlier assertion that she was not missed is in fact a diagnosis for herself, unbidden by external causes or events. We can also gather what she believes her father wants out of a woman, though not necessarily her, as she is unwilling to fulfill the role she perceives as hers to fill. What we can see, most of all, is how these problems are internalized, and how she deals with them. From this extensive lack of communication, connection, and interaction, she has developed into the person we see before us, hiding in her room, seeing the path to interaction but being thoroughly afraid and bitter of her fear of it.

In this short opening section, we can actually interpret a great deal of Magda's relationship with her father. Later on, when Johannes is about to sleep with Klein-Anna, we see how much the upsetting of the social order upsets Magda, as she hides in her room, and envisions her father by "...the thud of the boots, the black brow, the black eyeholes, the black hole of the mouth from which roars the great NO, iron, cold, thunderous that blasts me and buries me and locks me up. I am a child again..." (section 97, p. 55). The fear she has of her father is drawn from his position as exclusive leader of the social order. She may be white, but she is a woman, and therefore secondary to the men of her race. He tells her 'NO' and sequesters her in what she believes to be her place, locked away in her room. She grows afraid of the possibility that he will come to see her in the passions he has been displaying towards Klein-Anna recently, but continues onward instead to his own bedroom. What truly frightens her is that Klein-Anna will usurp the mother position above her. She asks her diary (for presumably that is what we're reading), "If she ceases to be the servant who will be the servant but I [?]" (section 99, p. 58). It becomes a direct contest for her right to retain the position she was born into, rather than switch out of the ruling class. She then considers it her only option to run away, but imagines Hendrik catching her in a sack, and bringing her back, thus making the image of her as a servant complete. She even imagines the scenario where she must serve them food, and Hendrik can abuse her at his pleasure.

Straining her ears to listen to the two of them in the kitchen, she says pointedly, "It is a love-feast they are having; but there is one feast which is nobler than the love-feast and that is the family meal. I should have been invited too" (section 98, pp. 56-57). This can be viewed as her assertion that family values should trump lust across the racial line, assuming that's in fact what this is. However, it would be more meaningful to look at this passage and determine that this is another symptom of Magda's being excluded. This "love-feast" is the pinnacle of productive and healthy interaction between two people, and it is the epitome of what she is deprived of. Even if Johannes and Klein-Anna

were in love, and a non-threatening love, one that was never consummated and thus never interrupted the social order, could it be claimed in seriousness that she should have a place at that table at that particular time?

There is a strong vein of this fear of the social upset in the beginning as well. Looking back, it seems strange that when Magda's step-mother attempts to connect with her, she rejects this outright. Starved for attention, when the new woman offers to make a happy household, and wishes for the two of them to be like sisters, it seems odd that Magda would turn this down so flatly. She asks her, "I want you to think of me as a sister, not an enemy" (section 11, p. 4). Isn't this companionship, especially at such a deep level, exactly what she wants and probably what she needs? We can see this same desire in Magda much later on. She says much later of Klein-Anna that "I would like to be her little sister" (section 168, p. 95) and discusses several things they could do together, a direct echo of the stepmother's earlier request.

Before the step-mother is revealed to be a fantasy, Magda writes, "I ask myself: why, since the moment she came clip-clop across the flats [...] have I refused speech with her, stubbornly exerting myself to preserve the monologue of my life?" (section 27, p. 13). We may ask the same thing, why she refuses this connection. We can see that she entertains several possibilities between them, but unlike the rest of the things that "happen" against contradictory alternatives or are suddenly reversed, we can see this as a listing of possibilities that Magda is not interested in, for as she creates and writes her own narrative, she doesn't follow any of these through, doesn't bother to develop them. More interesting thoughts are occurring to her at the same time, and these are the first parricide; sections 27, 28, and 29 are short interruptions before she returns to what will be revealed as a fantasy very shortly afterward. Is this simply an emotionally reactive and unthinking narrator, or something more?

The 'glutted' woman is the opposite in shape as opposed to the daughter, who often describes herself in expressly unattractive terms, short and slender with no particular fat on her body. The stepmother courts the father's favor easily, and yet, Magda cannot ignore the woman's lips; in her capacity as narrator this is significant. She also goes to see the two in their marital bed, and the step-mother puts a finger to her lips, silencing the narrator from voicing her true desires. Magda is then forced to strip, is inspected by the woman, and believes she is found wanting. "She watches me with full ironical lips. I drop my clothes at the door. In the glare of the moonlight she goes over my poor beseeching body" (section 20, p. 9). Magda then watches them after an intercourse with a clear aim for child-bearing, and then ponders what it would be like to have a child of her own, and how it would be

“a calamity”, discussing further all the attendant disasters and perversions of a regular birth and childhood that would ensue if she could ever find a husband, with no thought even given to whom the husband would be. Her construction of the step-mother begins to unravel.

More than just Magda's unreliability and her barren life, we can see in this early section a clear indicator of her desire and her fears that are holding her back. What she wishes for is to be in that state of ultimate acceptance, in a new body that impresses her current environs with the people in them, and comfortably situated in a social setting with a language that suits her, that removes the distinctions of hierarchy. This seam stitched the wrong way from the rest of the novel shows how Magda wishes she could be, able to command these connections and the defeats of her isolation, while her refusal in this hypothetical out-reach emphasizes that this is something she must always struggle towards, and ultimately be frustrated in her attempts to achieve.

In the first few pages, we see a vivid depiction of the main character and how she comports herself in the face of her particular challenges. However, it's worth looking at the crux of her desires: should she fulfill this dream, she would be sleeping with her father. Already, she says, “...when I think of male flesh, white, heavy, dumb, whose flesh can it be but his?” (section 21, p. 9). The aforementioned 'NO' of her father can be understood at least partly as a refusal for him to enter into this sort of incestuous relationship, as well as his unwillingness to break the social order, where he accepts her approaches towards him. It can also be understood as his refusal to acknowledge her or interact with her. Near the end of the book, she explains that this is the order of things, and it has even affected her, too: “To the slave who would only say *Yes*, my father could only say *No*, and I after him, and that was the start of all my woe.” (section 248, p.140). It's this keeping of the order that forces Magda into her state of isolation from the only other white person on the farm. This could represent the growing distance between those controlling the political direction of South Africa when this book was written and those that they were ruling over. It can also represent the separation between the ruling class and the 'common' white people who are reputed to be a higher class of citizen, as they carry out more and more in the name of that 'common' citizen. It can certainly be said that Johannes maintains the racial social hierarchy on the farm not just for himself, but in Magda's name as well.

Magda appears to have learned this abrasive control of those below her and comes to try to represent this position of enforcer of isolation when she has the option of allowing Hendrik into her circle of trust. This is shown in the sequence where Magda is trying to get Hendrik to help her bury her father, and, when encountering his resistance, resorts to insulting him: “Don't just stand there, help

me!' I scream. 'You damned *hotnot*, it's all your fault, you and your whore!' I am dizzy with rage. He turns, clamps his hat down on his head, and begins to march away. 'Filth! Coward!' (section 180, p. 99). Magda is at a unique crossroad here, when she shouts this, stifling the budding relationship she could have with Hendrik (and, very likely, Klein-Anna). With Johannes gone, she's able to redefine the social situation between herself and the servants. Is she unable to conceive of this opportunity, or is she stuck in the outmoded fashion of relating to the 'brown people'? It seems most likely that language has again become her enemy, and she is unable to communicate in a way that doesn't have hierarchical connotations that cement her in her social place.

This reliance on the colonizer's foreign language seems to hover over all of the most dramatic interactions, where relations are at their most fragile. Even as he lays dying, Magda beseeches her father to speak, hoping for a small redemption in his language, for him to give one small bit of hope to their failed relationship, but he does not. "Speak to me! Do I have to call on you in words of blood to make you speak? What horrors more do you demand of me? Must I carve out my beseechings with a knife on your flesh? Do you think you can die before you have said Yes to me?" (section 136, p. 78). At this point, as well as several others, we see her hatred of him as a request for any sort of acknowledgment, a last go-to to demand some sort of recognition from him. As she can get nothing from him, she tries everything she can imagine, and has no basis for non-extreme interaction with him, as she sees in him hatred and yet morbid desire. If we are to go by the example set for us in the opening of the novel, we can safely presume they are likely constructs of her own design. Her protestations outside of his adulterous bedroom door could be seen in this way, ruining the one thing he is driven towards in order to get something out of him. Eventually, unable to succeed, she resorts to firing the rifle to grab his attention.

It is important to note that Magda does not consider patricide until she sees what she has done, standing "hand to mouth" (section 123, p. 70) when she sees the injury. The firing of the rifle was actually an extension of the ringing of the bell and her humming, which were meant to get her father's attention. While they did precisely this, her actions did not stop him. Determined to drive herself between this union like a wedge, she resorts to aiming the gun into his window "toward the far ceiling of the room" (section 118, p. 66). To the end, she only wants his acknowledgment and recognition, though she is unable to procure it without disastrous consequences; we can see why she intermittently refers to herself as the Angel of Death.

The Language of the Oppressed

In a way, when her father is shot and killed (assuming the second time she kills her father is not a creation of her overactive imagination as the first attempt was), Hendrik comes to take up the position left open by his absence. Michela Canepari-Labib draws a connection between the two: "...being stuck in the Oedipal phase, Magda, after eliminating her father, lets Hendrik fill the absence created by her parricide, thereby assuming, in relation to the servant, the same submissive and servile attitude she experienced in relation to her father" (p. 184). Magda spends a brief time competing with Hendrik for this role. At first, it is not a competition, and it appears that she and the servants are attempting to redefine the social order, but this quickly falls apart.

Initially, when she is attempting to protect Klein-Anna, she is happy merely for the interaction when Hendrik begins to shake her and she falls, "I am dizzy but gay and ready for more" (section 142, pp. 82-83). As her father dies, she begins to feel out how it is other people are able to connect. While she and Hendrik clean the room and dispose of the body, there is a sense of community, and she would almost seem to get along well with both Hendrik and Klein-Anna. However, after the burial, and before the rape, we can see at each juncture either her or Hendrik forcing relations between the two, and this is something she is ill-equipped to manage. Her struggle to remain on top of the social structure quickly falls apart.

This seems like a power-play, and if we look at the story from a colonizer/colonized perspective, it displays a larger meaning. What is perhaps the most naked part of the novel when it comes to social structure is the way in which they compete to fill the void. The details of these relationships play out in as small a detail as the pronouns the characters use to refer to each other, a sign of the precision of Coetzee's writing. There are several parts where characters distinctly do not use personal pronouns to refer to each other; even Magda can only refer to her father in spoken word as Daddy, a disembodied, respected third person: "Daddy should not have given him brandy", and "Can I help Daddy to get into bed?" (sections 130-131, p. 73). Hendrik and Anna must always refer to Johannes as *baas* or *my baas* and Magda with them, when referring to those that are situated higher up the social chain: women speaking up to men, 'brown' speaking up to white.

Magda, likewise, is always referred to as 'the miss'. It's clear she is aware of the distance between them that this is creating, as she initially attempts to move Hendrik and Klein-Anna into positions of equality with her. As Klein-Anna is sleeping in the house while Hendrik is away, Magda appeals to her to call her just by her name. "What do you call me in your thoughts?' 'Miss?'....'But now

I am just Magda and you are just Anna. Can you say Magda? Come, say Magda for me.' 'No miss, can't.'" (section 203, p.111). There is a significant separation here on the racial divide, between white and 'brown', where an equal exchange cannot take place. There is no equality between social strata if the words that people use to refer to each other are not equal. The language itself is maintaining the separated levels of superiority. In this exchange, as well as others, Coetzee highlights the difference between the levels of the social structure. At the same time, by phrasing it in this way, he is showing that these separate levels cannot be easily overcome, as Anna is unable to pronounce the name, and does not give a good reason, except that she "can't". Therefore, the reasoning for this is not attributable to an external source, but is revealed to be an internal one. This is what the oppressor has made of her, someone unable to recognize her fellow human being as equal, even when there is no compulsion to refer to the old hierarchical system.

It is this sort of failure of exchange that highlights Coetzee's prediction for the aftermath of the eventual fall of the ruling class and the system they have instituted. Ian Glenn offers a link between this aspect and larger issues in the text: "The sociolinguistic codes reinforce the theme of social isolation. 'Mies is die mies' ['Miss is the miss'] is the social judgment on Magda, who is unable to move from the hierarchic distance of feudal social relationships to the I-you closeness for which she hopes" (p. 129). This sort of distinction that Klein-Anna gives is not only the fault of the colonizer, but it is her unconscious way of distancing herself from Magda, and anyone on her side of the 'I-Other' divide. This divide is not one that is set up by Klein-Anna, but at this point it becomes one that only she can tear down. If this is the separation that the white farmers have established, then the consequence is that they can never return to the state of equality, should they ever want to, completely due to their own actions. David Atwell agrees: "Magda...dramatizes the vicissitudes of the *I-You* relation, showing its implications for the subject in a deeply divided society" (*Doubling the Point*, p. 7). The worse the upper classes make it for the lower, the harder it will be to repair the damage when the system falls, as portrayed by the eventual rape scenes.

There is an example of this divide early on: "You and you, I say, crouching in the cinders, stabbing my finger at father and stepmother" (section 12, p. 5). This is of course spoken by the spinster, as she tries to come to terms with the 'mother' role in the household being replaced by her new stepmother. This is the only way to get herself on equal footing with the two above her, by naming them as not Daddy and Stepmother, but the declarative "You" that does not speak up or down from the "I" she attempts to define.

As Hendrik and Anna begin to ridicule her, Klein-Anna adds an interesting addition, one worth special attention: “‘You, you, you,’ sings Klein Anna from behind [Hendrik] where I cannot see her” (section 195, p. 106). This comes as Hendrik is teasing Magda, and Klein-Anna begins to find her own way to tease. Klein-Anna is playing with the idea that she is finally able to say what, in her servants’ role, she was unable to pronounce. It’s by singing ‘You’ that she is finally able to take away what her former masters had placed upon her; the problem by the fireside is now gone. The problem is the ramifications of removing that system and what it begins to mean for those who were implicit in it, willingly or not.

Teresa Dovey expounds on this point:

This usage must therefore be regarded as significant, its function being to emphasize the way in which those in the subservient position cannot pronounce the *you*, and thus cannot confirm the existence of those in the position of mastery...This amounts to a refusal, or an inability, to recognize the other’s selfhood: for Klein-Anna, the only identity Magda has is that of Mistress. She recognizes Magda only from her dependent position as servant, which is, in Hegelian terms, no recognition at all. (p. 172)

To consecrate their position as master, the colonizer needs the acceptance of the colonized. In *Giving Offense*, Coetzee refers to the final stage of censorship as when the rules of censorship are internalized by the writer subjected to the censoring (pp. 125-126); the writer’s final acceptance of censorship makes it a part of writing as well as an external institution. An institution must force its way, and can be eluded and gotten around. If the rules are internalized, the institution is no longer necessary, and the writer has finally accepted their position as less powerful than the institution. Similarly, it can be said that the final stage of domination has occurred when the dominated recognize and accept their lowered position. Near the end, we can see Magda’s recognition of this, and her drive. “Why will no one speak to me in the true language of the heart? The medium, the median – that is what I wanted to be! Neither master nor slave, neither parent nor child, but the bridge between, so that in me, the contraries should be reconciled” (p. 145). After the departure of the father, she attempts to bring herself and the servants to an equal footing and remake the social structure on the farm in a way where she will no longer be apart from everyone. However we see several places where she is not able to overcome this separation, and falls victim to its separation as it is being reversed.

The first evidence of her difficulty to overcome the separation is evident in the first version of the novel, where Magda wrote in English but spoke mostly in Afrikaans, a division some of her ruminations on the use of language support more fully. As she says early on, she “is the one who stays in her room reading or writing or fighting migraines” (section 1, p.1), and as she begins to speculate

about her own education, she concludes, “My learning has the reek of print” (section 92, p. 51). Since she writes her diary in English, it is quite reasonable to assume that she is more comfortable with the language and has grown up with it. This assertion is somewhat muddled by her claims that she “grew up with the servants' children. I spoke like one of them before I learned to speak like this” (section 16, p.7) despite these children being conspicuously absent from the rest of the novel. It is entirely likely this is simply one of her many 're-writes' of her own story. It's assumed by Glenn that English is the 'central language' for her as well, “English is the language of the dictionary and the isolated bedroom, of international thought” (p. 128). International thought may be a strange thing to associate with this lonely spinster, but we can see how learned Magda appears to be; Dominic Head, among others, notes that Magda's “narrative is peppered with [unreferenced] quotations from, or allusions to, many important figures in modern Western literature and philosophy, including Blake, Hegel, Kierkegaard, Freud, Kafka, Sartre and Beckett” (p. 59), and Dick Penner subscribes to a much longer list (p. 69). Magda has also been described by Stephen Watson as advanced in her thinking well beyond her historical setting (“Speaking”, cited in Glenn, p. 122). Though Afrikaans is a language she uses (in the first version) frequently to address the 'help', there is no bigger separation between her and them than that of language. It affects the way she thinks, feels, and how she's able to express herself.

The issue of diglossia, of linguistic difference, is closely linked to issues of power, status and address. In the original South African edition of the novel, the dialogue moves crucially, as Magda searches for closeness to Hendrik and Anna, into a mixing of English and Afrikaans: an attempt to overcome the linguistic and political distance of colonialism and otherness. (Glenn, p.129)

The 'othering' process is easy when the 'other' looks different from the I, and even more so when they sound different as well. The vast linguistic differences of South Africa lend themselves well to this process, and Afrikaans becomes yet another way to hold each other at a distance. This distance is not something Magda is able to easily overcome.

We can look at the one moment where Magda is closest to the servants and trace both its initial buildup and inevitable breakdown to understand it on a different level. What can probably be called her happiest moment is after she and Hendrik dispose of all the evidence of Johannes' death, and look through the room with all of the stored clothes, making a discovery together and enjoying the fruits of that discovery. All of a sudden she tries to share the house with them, bringing them in closer to her. “The words have come out without premeditation. I feel joy,” she says, “That must be how other people speak, from their hearts” (section 169, p. 95). This moment is also visible when they are watching Klein-Anna in her new shoes:

I stand side by side with Hendrik, watching. Hendrik has lost his old stiffness. His arm brushes my side. I do not flinch. It is not beyond reason that I should want to whisper something to him, something kindly and affectionate and amusing, that I should turn towards him, and he bend towards me, that for a brief moment I should find myself in that pocket of air that is his own private space [...]. (section 166, p. 93)

This is at the end of a lot of work they have done together, Hendrik showing her how to do handiwork like saw through bricks and mortar, and she having introduced him to reading and sewing. The downfall begins when this desire of hers to have them in the house comes out in the way she is used to addressing the servants: as an order.

The space between the two last quotes was where Coetzee chose to have Magda describe the stranglehold the 'law' has on her, and how her “lips are tired, I explain to him, that they want to rest, they are tired of all the articulating they have had to do since they were babies [...] they could no longer simply part themselves to make way for the long *aaaa* which has [...] always been enough for them” (section 163, p. 91). The use of her language has finally tired her down as she begins to struggle against it. As “Hendrik and Klein-Anna stand over me waiting for instructions” (*ibid.*), she struggles to tell them that the way the 'law' has shaped her speech is oppressive to her, but, ironically, cannot find the right words. This is the closest Magda comes in the text to escaping the grip of the language she is slave to, but she merely recognizes it's hold over her, and submits to it anew. She comes down to describing how the law is inside her and will eventually eat its way out of her, “until there it stands before you, the law grinning and triumphant again, its soft skin hardening in the air, while I lie sloughed, crumpled, abandoned on the floor” (section 163, p. 92). It is at this time that we can see her desire for a lack of language, which plays itself out in several episodes, which will be detailed later.

As a product of this social order, Magda is inherently equipped with this inability to connect to those people socially below her. After the above-mentioned scene, she attempts to increase this bond, but does so through force, which is the only way she knows how. “No miss,' he murmurs, 'I think we had better go home now.' I grow stronger as he grows weaker. 'No: I want you to sleep here, just for the one night...' (section 169, p. 95). Or when she asks him to dig a hole for Johannes' body, he replies “Miss, this is a porcupine hole, there's nothing in it.' 'Do as I tell you Hendrik.' Hendrik toils while I circle him” (section 175, p. 96). This has clear echoes of earlier, as “I circle him [Johannes] like a moon” (section 14, p. 6). She begins to fall into a dependent relationship with Hendrik not only because she has next to no practical knowledge, but because she is unable to fill the father-figure role, which he quickly finds his to assume. Her position under and within the protection of the central authority figure all of this time has led her to be protected not just from those being held down, but from the world's

little challenges and lessons, represented by the practical knowledge Hendrik gives her during the disposal of the body. We can also see her lacking this type of knowledge as, when she should be looking for new sources of income to keep the farm going, she simply goes back to cleaning it. As a result, she is the spinster who can sew and read and clean and little else. This is another example of the faults of the system she has been born into: her father had no plans to have her assume leadership in his stead, and she is unprepared for it when it inevitably comes, just as Klein-Anna is unprepared for any role outside subservience to Hendrik, and finds adaptation to it next to impossible, while unable to explain why.

This again has echoes of the historical situation in which the text is written. Head offers a perspective on this: “this is an unstable interior monologue in which the narrator enacts the psychological breakdown attributable to, and representative of, the divisive colonial mind” (p. 51). It's clear that the political structure of South Africa during the time of publication is relevant, Head argues, because “If other editions – written entirely in English – represent a concession to the international English-speaking audience, the original conception [with Afrikaans dialogue] suggests that the Afrikaner was Coetzee's principal target reader” (p. 49). It's not difficult to see a particular class in Magda: the upper-class wo/man who does not condone the social structure, but because of the color of their skin, is dragged along unwillingly with the unjust authority figure, and will suffer the consequences for it, regardless of the actions taken in removing the colonizer.

We can see this in the scene where Klein-Anna sleeps in the house with Magda, and is stiff, unrelenting, doesn't allow Magda in at any opening, merely doing what she is told rather than enjoying the experience which was the original intention. Even here, Magda finds relief at doing nothing to be on top: “She snuffles miserably, trapped in the dark house with the witchwoman. This is not going to be a dialogue, thank God, I can stretch my wings and fly where I will” (section 203, p.110).

A Spinster's Identity

Magda's constant repetition of the phrase 'I am I' shows her difficulty in eschewing her own identity without the others around. However, it never seems to lead her anywhere, and means nothing to the servants, who tend to ignore it along with most of the things she says. Dovey calls the statement self-dependent: “Magda's claim, 'I am I' allows for no resting point: the first *I* is a subjective *I* which is dependent on the second *I*, an objective entity, itself dependent on the first, positing, subjective *I*” saying further that she “is a prisoner of her monologue, trapped by her own declaration of

independence” (p. 177). She is never able to move beyond this, and every time she utters it, Magda lets it stand, hoping it will achieve something on its own, which it is powerless to do. This becomes the replacement for her otherwise externally defined sense of identity.

Another consideration is that the phrase is biblical, a shortening of God's declaration of identity, 'I am that I am' (Exodus 3:14), as he tells Moses of his authority by which to gather the Jews of Egypt and lead them. If this view is taken, Magda would have clear intentions attempting to command Hendrik and Klein-Anna to obey her. However, taking this interpretation gives her an overload of feigned authority, claiming commonality with a deity. This may be an overreaction to her feelings of powerlessness or dependency, but is another representation of her attempts to escape the system that she is trapped inside.

It has been argued that “Magda's discourse does not attain the continuity of narrative at all [...] in *In the Heart of the Country* we have a form of discourse which cannot, or will not, produce the 'illusion of sequence' and which is therefore articulated around static existence: it's a desiring hole which cannot achieve the 'whole-ness' of narrative continuity” (Dovey, p. 152). We can see Magda say this almost directly, as she calls herself “a hole crying to be whole” (section 87, p. 44). Her entrapment of language extends so far as to make up her very existence. The metaphor is clear, that we do not exist without our language, it comprises us. Magda ruminates on how her language defines things around her, but could it be that it also defines her perceptions? That she is unable to see Hendrik and Klein-Anna as anything but lower beings? It would explain the disintegration of their congeniality after the death of Johannes, as she resorts to commands to try to order the two of them to share her house and get closer and more friendly.

Paul Cantor describes Magda's inability to conjure her own identity as beginning to affect the narrative itself (pp. 89-90). There are several instances when she refers to herself less as a person and more as a character. Atwell picks up on this as well: “Magda begins to lose her exclusive hold on the time of her fictive constructions – on the narrative perspective, that is, and the way time is controlled within it” (*Politics of Writing*, p. 66). As we jump from one section to another, she says, “A day must have intervened here”, and “Whole hours, whole afternoons go missing. I seem to have grown impatient with the sluggish flow of time (sections 149-150, pp. 86-87). Early on, Magda tells us that she is “the one who keeps [the clock] wound and who weekly, from sun and almanac, corrects it. Time on the farm is the time of the wide world, neither a jot nor a tittle more or less” (section 9, p. 3), which is tantamount to giving order to what would otherwise be chaos. It is important to note that the clock is

a European invention introduced to Africa by the colonizers, and it is the center piece of European order and linearity, around which everything moves and existence is aligned. Magda herself says, “One day some as yet unborn scholar will recognize in the clock the machine that has tamed the wilds” (section 9, p. 3). She is responsible for this foundational tenet of her society, and it is one she cannot give away or distance herself from to adapt to the servants.

Magda even tells us that “if I spend a day in the loft emptying old trunks, I will find evidence of a credible past” (section 81, p. 41), which she has yet to give us by this point in the novel. Most tellingly, she offers the following:

How can I afford to sleep? If for one moment I were to lose my grip on the world, it would fall apart: Hendrik and his shy bride would dissolve to dust in each others' arms and sift to the floor, the crickets would stop chirping, the house would deliquesce to a pale abstract of lines and angles against a pale sky, my father would float like a black cloud [...] All that would remain would be me, lying for that fatal instant in a posture of sleep on an immaterial bed above and immaterial earth before everything vanished. I make it all up in order that it shall make me up. (section 137, p. 79)

The last line is the most interesting, where she suggests that without her possible fiction of the world, she would cease to be. When we close the book and re-enter our own world, this is exactly what happens to the characters and settings, and without those settings, Magda ceases to exist. It's clear that her language is central to her identity, and she requires a constant stream of it. With only the language of invaders, and oppressors, she underscores how much it is a part of her. It is with insistences like this that we see how she can never bridge the gap between herself and the servants, even when the physical head of the social structure is removed.

Head again suggests that this is what is referred to when Magda speaks of 'the law', that it is a law of languages which controls her. With references to the law as, “the law has gripped my throat, I say and do not say, it invades my larynx, its one hand on my tongue, its other hand on my lips...” and invading her body, “its feet in my feet, its hands in my hands, its sex drooping through my hole” (section 163, pp. 91-92), we can see the role language plays in her identity; she is bound to her colonial languages. Early on, Magda says, “I pick up and sniff and describe and drop, moving from one item to the next, numbering the universe steadily with my words” (section 51, p. 29). Through her medium of language she is able to understand the universe and tame it, naming it. It's in this way that she is able to gain control of her own surroundings, which, to us are only her words anyway.

Speaking further of the law that oppresses her, Head offers the following remark: “The law is the law of language and command, which possesses Magda as much as she possesses it” (p. 55). While

Magda is trapped within the role of user of language, her thoughts are only translatable and relatable through it and its conventions. If her illiterate servants are to understand her, it must be within the institution of Afrikaans (or English, in later editions).

Magda states that she is trapped within the confines of her own language again, at a crucial point. “What passes between us now is a parody. I was born into a language of hierarchy, of distance and perspective. It was my father-tongue. I do not say it is the language my heart wants to speak, I feel too much the pathos of its distances, but it is all we have” (section 195, p. 106). This is right before Magda loses power over Hendrik, just before he dresses up in Johannes' old clothes, taking the vacant position of authority. We can read this as Magda's failure to connect with the servants/native population, but that it may not be a failure on her part. Rather, this failure to bridge the gap is destined from the start. She has grown only with these linguistic devices, learned to speak in a language of inequality and distance, and is ill-equipped to bridge this gap when the time comes. Ultimately, the language is still home turf for Magda and her father, where Hendrik and Klein-Anna must come and meet them. Shortly thereafter, in the same section, Hendrik relates Magda and Klein-Anna as half-sisters, and is transcending the Miss/You boundary. The confluence is no accident: “the failure of the 'father tongue' leads to a kind of fevered incestuous uncertainty of sexual status and kinship ties [...] For Coetzee, structuralist, these linguistic, sexual, social issues are interlinked” (Glenn, 134). The linguistic issues referred to above combined with the apartheid-era Immorality Act forbidding extra-marital sexual contact between whites and any other race (one of the pillars of legislative Grand Apartheid) created prevention of “true, reciprocal exchange” between the societies, and the “colonial (Afrikaner) society [found] itself sexually, linguistically, artistically” separated (Glenn, p. 134).

There are a few moments earlier on in the text where we can see Magda's approach to the servants, inventing a desire for lineage in Hendrik in section 46 that sounds distinctly European, and in 47 inventing a motivation for him to get married. She admits immediately afterward that “I know nothing of Hendrik...in all our years together on the farm he has kept his station while I have kept my distance [...] We have our places, Hendrik and I, in an old old code” (section 48, p. 27). But this hasn't stopped her from seeing him in her own terms, creating his backstory for him rather than getting it from his own mouth. Could her projections also predispose her to not understand Hendrik when she has the option? If she sets out a future for him, completely of her own design, there is a good chance that Magda will be disappointed when it does not come true. Moreover, it shows her desires for him, as colonizer, prescribing something for him before she understands his desires. Adding the question and

answer dialogue she so enjoys when Hendrik first arrived, this is her foundation for all of her subsequent interactions with him, and it's no surprise she is unable to establish an equal footing with him when that footing would be on her terms, rather than his own.

Magda begins to move into a stage where connection is possible without words, where language falls away and it is no longer necessary to rely on its form, that is a physical connection. This starts early on in her wish to be in the place of her step-mother, as mentioned before. Her first description of Klein-Anna is meant to evoke what her father sees in the woman, but the narrative never leaves first person, and so we must conclude that Magda is inventing her father seeing “the red kerchief, the wideset eyes, the pointed chin, the sharp little teeth, the foxy jaw, the thin arms, the slender body” (section 49, p. 28) from her store of what she witnesses in Anna (the next section confirms that the 'light' around them is her own, shining about the farm like a light house, illuminating the area of her focus, as well as that of the narrative).

This could even be read as Magda attempting to circumvent the law which has a grip on her, getting around the law of language that is choking her and invading her. She is forbidden equal exchange by Afrikaner law establishing a social hierarchy between herself and the servants, and is unable to find the words for it anyway. Canepari-Labib sees this and points out that:

Realising she could never obtain any form of communication with other human beings through the medium of language, Magda tries to go beyond its mediations and attempts to achieve a 'non-verbal' dialogue between 'substances' through sex, as an intimate contact between real bodies, unmediated by words, is [sic], she thinks, the only possibility of overcoming language. (p. 185)

Most of the rest of her sexual desiring appears when she senses that a real connection with the servants is imminent, i.e. after her father has died. Most of this is directed at Klein-Anna, where Magda sees that the “light glows on her bronze flanks and breasts for which I find again I have no words. My heart quickens as I settle the dress over her head [...] She wears no underclothes” (section 165, p. 93). She also theorizes what it would be like if they were sisters: “I would like to share a bed with her and when she tiptoes in at midnight peep with one eye at her undressing, and sleep all night cuddled against her back” (section 168, p. 95). When Magda invites her into the house, attempting to raise the girl up to an equal footing with her, Klein-Anna is too scared of her to react positively.

Magda's approach is intentionally put into an intimidating light, to show that she is trying to force this connection on the girl.

Anna begins to make up her bed. I do not leave the kitchen but sit against the table watching her [...] 'Get into bed' [...] She covers herself and turns away from the light. 'Tell me, don't you

undress, Anna? Don't you undress when you go to sleep? Do you keep your kerchief on when you sleep?' She pushes the kerchief off. 'Tell me, do you sleep with your clothes on when your husband is with you? That I can't believe.' (section 203, pp. 109-110)

In this section, it sounds like Magda is attempting to replace Hendrik as master of Anna rather than having the equal exchange she so longs for. "I pull a chair over to the bedside," Magda continues, "I crane over her from the stiff kitchen chair and hector; she hears only waves of rage crashing in my voice, and sobs drearly" (*ibid.*), and in this, her position in the conversation is clear. She merely says words to the girl and only elicits answers when her narrative cannot go on without them. Even these words resort to reinforcing Magda's identity through her name. She also speaks of what it is like with a husband, questioning Klein-Anna's sexual relationships, attempting to gain more understanding of them and trying to convey that this is the last avenue of connection left to her after her father was removed. Her care is not reciprocal: "I find her head and press my lips against her forehead. For a moment she struggles, then stiffens and endures me. We lie together, at odds, I waiting for her to fall asleep, she waiting for me to go. I grope my way out of the kitchen to my own bed. I am doing my best in this unfamiliar world of touch" (section 203, p. 111). Klein-Anna is unable to get away from Magda, and unable to do anything but follow orders, too used to the old social structure. As long as this gap exists between them, any attempts at bridging it from Magda's side will only widen the gap, and increase the resentment, not diminish it. However, both are completely inexperienced with overcoming this gap, and are held apart by it.

This final resort also appears in the ending of the book, as Magda attempts to establish a dialogue with the postman, Piet, and the "flying machines". By the time Piet arrives, Magda has failed so miserably at all of her attempts to connect with the outside world (whether through the father or the servants) that she turns to making suggestive motions towards him (which are comically rejected). Similarly, the flying machines bring her language she does not comprehend (though, interestingly, the different language is no problem for her), and she responds, "descending to ideographs, I spent all my stones on a sketch of a woman lying on her back, her figure fuller than mine, her legs parted, younger than myself too, this was no time for scrupulosity" (section 257, p. 145). I will return to the further significance of these flying machines and their messages.

The Enigmatic Rape

Strange failings of language also manifest themselves in the sections before and after the rape. Directly beforehand, Hendrik comes back with the withdrawal slip, "Words, words: I am talking simply to hold

back the wall of his anger that towers over me. I push my chair back and rise unsteadily. He does not retreat an inch” (section 204, p. 113). This is one of her failings of language, another example of the words of the colonizer being unable to hold back the rage of the colonized when faced with broken promises, whether intentionally or unintentionally. In this situation, there would be no Afrikaans or English word to pacify him.

Another time language fails the characters is when she tries to talk to Hendrik after the initial rape, when he starts coming more regularly, after the servants have moved into the house (an event that, looking forward in Coetzee's *oeuvre*, we can see mirrored in *Disgrace* with Lucy's accommodation and/or submission to Petrus). During this particular time, Magda says of herself, “I lean out from the bed and catch his hand. I can hear from my voice, and he must hear it too, that I am changing” (section 217, p. 120). This change is coming after her description of the increase of frequency in his visits. This can be read in relation to her previous question, if she is now a woman. Canepari-Labib suggests the following: “Magda is unable to achieve an identity in her relationship with Hendrik. The servant no longer recognizes her as his mistress, and as his attitude makes plain, he does not recognize her as a woman. Magda's question...must therefore be answered in the negative” (p. 184). But we can see the establishment of her identity as going deeper than that. While she is unable to gain recognition from Hendrik, she is not only forming her identity from what he thinks of her. To some degree she is allowing this to happen over and over again. She is not sobbing, as she does the first (several?) time(s?) after Hendrik returns with the withdrawal note, and some part of her is getting what she wanted, which was some sort of interaction, physical or verbal. Unlike her inability to grow into the leadership position for Agterplaas, or to keep it functioning after her father is disposed, she is able to adapt to what she is being put through. This comes from her inviting the servants into the house one final time, and her “stroking him with swings of my hair, it is something he seems to like, it is something he allows me” (section 218, p. 121), among other small details, which hardly suggests she is not enjoying the events on some level. Combined with Hendrik's frightened refusal of the lighting of a candle (*ibid.*), we can see that he is entering this part of the story as a force, and it is a commentary on her more than it is on him. While neither that text nor this thesis, nor either of their authors (myself or Coetzee), support rape, in this instance it can be read as the eventual success of forced exchange. Since Magda is unable to create an equal exchange with the servants on her own terms, she takes what she perceives to be Hendrik's and tries to enter into it. In each scene she is referring to him not by his name, but by the more familiar 'You' of mutual exchange, having finally breached the language barrier.

By the time we reach the entrance of the neighbors and the departure of the servants, we see quite a calm, pacified version of Magda. She describes the morning as a place where “I can conceive of myself blind and happy in a world like this, raising my face to the sun and basking, tuning my ears to the distance. Klein-Anna's scissors slide cool across the nape of my neck, obedient to my murmurs” (section 227, p. 125). Not only is she described as one might describe a lizard, basking in the sun, but she no longer requires words to establish a working relationship with Anna. She is working towards an embodiment of the state she so desperately wanted earlier, where she no longer needs words or premonition to have beneficial exchange.

In fact, Magda proves so adept at this game, that at one point Hendrik seems to be frightened of her, and resorts to calling her 'miss' again. “What have I done to make you bitter?' 'Nothing, miss.' He is scrambling out of bed [...] 'Can't you understand? All I want is a little peace between us. It isn't much to ask for.' 'No, miss.' And he is gone.” (section 222, p. 122). Magda proves herself to be so strong in this way that Hendrik has to revert to the old system of naming that he had thrown off. Penner even notes that in the initial repetitions of the rape scene, “in each successive version, Hendrik's and Magda's violence diminish while Magda's acceptance of the act increases” (p. 67). We can see the eventual evolution of the rape scene as it moves from Hendrik simply kicking her, and in the last, they have moved to a bedroom, and there is no physical violence, only intimidation. We can see that this is possibly her overcoming the event or dealing with it, as the word rape is never actually uttered and each successive time is made softer and more acceptable, until her words chase him out of the room each night. If this is read as the fall of the regime, then we can see what Penner calls “the circles of the maelstrom created by the sinking of the massive, hierarchical master/slave society” (p. 68). The servants seem to be ultimately unable to escape this after all. After Hendrik and Klein-Anna run off at the possibility of being discovered by Magda's neighbors as being on equal footing with the colonizer, we see a metaphor for “an era between the demise of the colonial order of her father and the advent of a new order, or chaos, yet to arise” (*ibid.*). Magda, reviving the colonial order, enters a new phase where she is defined by her isolation from the rest of the world: her neighbors are not welcomed onto the farm, and she loses the possibility to connect with those below her. Her slow spiral into insanity through the remaining part of the book is the fate of the system she represents.

However, Glenn offers another reason for the multitude of rewrites and their variations during the rape scene, finding a progression in them: “Magda's narrating comes close to collapse when she cannot take the name of the father in the sense of real power, by signing next to the X in the post office

withdrawal book, an act that would give her access to her father's name, money, and power”, pointing to Coetzee's focus on the “symbolic economy between generations” (p. 135). Though Magda uses the currency of her forefathers, that being their language, she is unable to completely live up to the structure recently overthrown, or is careful not to, and cannot place her name in Johannes' stead or forge the document. Whatever struggles she may encounter with those she shares the post-colonizer stage with, she cannot take up the new role, or is unwilling to do so, which leaves the position to Hendrik, who takes it up in a different way.

If we read these events as the inability to truly connect in a language of mutual exchange, it's at this point, just before the servants run off, that Magda is connected most closely to them. Unfortunately for her, this connection is not reciprocal. She has no way of invading back, and must resort to her previous language that is incomplete, and hierarchical. We can see an example of this when Magda has invited the servants into the house, and they are talking over dinner: “Unsure of their footing here, unsure of my customs, they eat awkwardly. Anna casts her eyes down; Hendrik answers my questions about the farm in his old curt way....I am resolved to ask fewer questions and to chatter more, so that she will grow accustomed to the declarative mode” (sections 214-215, p. 119). This is when Hendrik begins to crawl into her bed more frequently. The problem becomes his encountering her language there too, and finds her and that language inseparable. It's something which he can only dumbly reject, whatever the request, and return to calling Magda 'miss', rather than 'you', even though she is careful to use that form of address for him. He is unable to stop it, and he does not come every night; in fact, one gets the idea that he begins to come less and less often, while worrying about Klein-Anna more and more – we see this concern in section 222, as Hendrik expresses concern over whether she will hear them or not.

This is why, ultimately, her neighbors, representing the same hierarchical order and language, come and frighten the servants so much that no amount of words are able to help; her pleas are unable to change Hendrik's mind about departing. In this scenario, in fact, the more she talks, the less likely she is to hear what she wants or convince either of them to stay. This forces Magda to observe that “There has been no transfiguration” (section 225, p. 124). This can be seen by looking at the format of section 228: there are short, direct, logical paragraphs from Hendrik, and he changes back to calling Magda 'You', though always in a tone of rejection. This can be compared to Magda's impassioned diatribe which continues for almost a full page. Additionally, at the end of this, not even she can remember what part finally forced him out the door: “Where was it in this torrent of pleas and

accusations that he walked out? Did he stay to the end?” (p. 129). She finds that her words are effective in driving him out, rather than entreating him to stay and play along.

Magda acknowledges the supremacy of her language. Her plea 'I am I' did not suffice, but neither did Hendrik's physical connection. Ultimately, Magda declares “I am pressed but not possessed, I am pierced but my core is not touched. At heart I am still the fierce virgin mantis of yore. Hendrik may take me, but it is I holding him holding I” (section 227, p. 127). There finally was not a mutual exchange, and though she didn't want it, she was the one who came out on top, once again, and the success of this exchange works to keep her permanently alone.

Complete Isolation

Perhaps the ending sequence, with the airplanes flying overhead, offers the final judgment on Magda's inherited situation. Section 230 sees her entering total isolation after Hendrik and Klein-Anna leave. Though Magda declares “I am I, not a people” (section 228, p. 128), Hendrik and Anna are unable to see the distinction, or are not interested, and desert her. In this way, Magda enters the final section of the novel, a full representative of Afrikaner culture. Head takes the flying machines that plague Magda as “voices of criticism and commentary on the colonial situation. They are associated with a utopian figure, since their language is a Spanish of universal meanings...evoking the unifying ideal of Esperanto” (p. 63). If there is a cooperation or common ground amongst the rest of the world, it is created without Magda, and only partially discernible. The flying machines offer their pronouncement on the utopian situation, Magda going so far as to suppose that “the machines might be flying in an ecstasy of self-absorption with their eyes fixed on the endless blue horizon” (section 252, p. 142). Her resentment against them steadily grows as they begin to offer messages and quotations that she does not completely understand, and in her misunderstanding, begins to think of as unrelated to her, and “Perhaps...meant only for the Spaniards, because unknown to me it has been decreed that Spaniards are the elect” (section 248, p. 140). She attempts communication, but it is unclear if the machines are even listening; if they are, they are clearly not interested. Eventually she tries to ignore them: “*A blind man dancing seems not to observe his period of mourning*, said the voices. Pooh! *It is a world of words that creates a world of things*. Pah!” (section 258, p. 146).

We can see that Magda is at least initially interested in the flying machines, but is only able to guess at how communication could go with them. Head writes that “she senses that their message is of value to her [...] but she fails to grasp the full significance of these indictments. Her response to the

first message [...] makes this clear. This kind of portentous pronouncement emphasizes overtly the purport of the allegory – of spinster Magda, representative of South Africa” (p. 63). The flying machines represent the rest of the world and their condemnation of apartheid-era South Africa, and the policies that govern it. She tries helplessly to lure them to her ground with messages about “Woman-love for you” while they lyrically try to tell her truths that will notify her to an essentially political message, a much higher calling. Further, “the first line of [Magda's] poem – referring to the proffered hope of waking to a new political dawn – translates as 'you offer me a desert'” (p. 64). Holding Magda as representative of South Africa, the imagery is also unmistakable: while the world soars into the technological future, Magda-as-South Africa lays isolated on the ground in a run-down farm, having driven off the rest of the inhabitants, going progressively more insane.

We can see Magda entering this mode of identifying with the colonizer more and more in section 248, after the first messages arrive, as she says “As for inventing enemies, the pitiful warrior in the hills was never as formidable as the enemy who walked in our shadow and said *Yes baas*” (p. 140). The message earlier in the section could be taken to say that the Afrikaner, “lacking external enemies and resistances, confined within an oppressive narrowness and regularity, man at last has no choice but to turn himself into an adventure” (section 248, p. 139), or adventurer, which is to say, man has no choice but to look for another conquest. This can quite easily be read as making the conquest part of the population, or finding within the Afrikaner the values and characteristics that the adventurer struggles to apply to the land around him, essentially making new enemies for themselves to combat once the old ones are gone.

Finally, Magda cannot bear to listen anymore, covering her head with her pillow as the flying machines speak to her in the night. The gap in this discourse is not one she is unable to overcome, but one she doesn't *want* to overcome. As the flying machines begin to hold her representative for her culture and its values, she begins to do the same, rejecting foreign invaders in the form of words and ideas. Two sections after their final message, section 261, Magda's father has returned, and they begin to get along fine, showing the resurrection of the old order. She takes him out for walks and begins to speak with him, rekindling the old relationship, even though it is one sided and he is silent: “He heard nothing but what goes on inside him, unless I am mistaken all this time and he hears all my chatter but chooses to ignore it” (section 263, p. 149). She even kisses him on the forehead in section 265, and in other parts reminisces about things that may very well not have happened, given the situation at the start of the text. We can take from this that it's South Africa that is going to isolate itself from the rest of

the world, and it is South Africans who are going to suffer for their deluded fantasies and inability to hold equal exchange or listen to external ideas.

Conclusion

When Magda fails to establish a relationship with Klein-Anna, she theorizes, “To the spur of desire we have only one response: to capture, to enclose, to hold” (section 226, p. 124). We can see this as an overarching curse on her desire to communicate ‘in the language of the heart’. To truly desire, one must attempt to possess. In his Jerusalem Prize Acceptance Speech, Coetzee describes South Africa’s failure of love for country and people by the colonists. “Magda at least has that love, or its cousin,” (Atwell, *Doubling the Point*, p. 61). But we see what becomes of the spinster when she tries to enact that love for people, and what it makes out of her. She is unable to overcome the greater gaps which she has inherited from her father (and father-figure) that surround her life and hold it apart from others. David Atwell highlights an ironic point, that “the act of parricide [the real one] is the result of her father's *breaking* the rules rather than *representing* them...” (*Politics of Writing*, p. 63). This is rather ironic because Magda was attempting to set things right, but she ends up creating only more violence for not only for herself, but the servants as well, and causing the downfall of the social structure by which she has lived.

She is cut off from using the language she desires, unable to engage in mutual exchange, and incapable of maintaining herself in her narrative, nor even the static world which she inhabits. “Coetzee fuses two types of alienation,” Caroline Rody claims, “this white colonial woman is extremely well situated to voice the frustrations of life in language, and this paper-thin narrator, unwillingly speaking this language she did not create, [which] protests the oppressions and divisions in human life more loudly and effectively than many a more conventionally realized literary soul,” (*South Atlantic Quarterly*, p. 162). As a portrait of a microcosm of South African society, Magda becomes a complete representation of what is wrong with her time, place, and position in it. Could she have escaped this violence easily, or without incurring any herself? If there was a way, she was not given it, never prepared for it, and was not informed that it may have been her charge. It's this form of isolation that becomes a central theme of Coetzee's writing in this text: the multiple divisions that keep getting drawn between the various peoples of South Africa's apartheid-era population will leave the country isolated, alone, confused, and in the past.

Chapter 2: *Life & Times of Michael K*

Several of Coetzee's main characters struggle with their isolation. Normally it is imposed upon them, and they struggle to escape from its grasp. Magda in *In the Heart of the Country* is unable to connect with any of the people around her. This comes from the way she has been raised to follow a system of hierarchy and has not found a way to escape it whether socially or linguistically. Her inability to connect also comes from others who keep that system in place, sometimes unwittingly, and are unable or uninterested in approaching her as an equal. The Magistrate in *Waiting for the Barbarians* finds it difficult to regain his position and express his views on the barbarians after being deposed by Colonel Joll. Susan Barton in *Foe* struggles against her unwritten voice, and her inability to have her truth told. And, as we shall see, Elizabeth Curren in *Age of Iron* struggles with what authority she has to speak to her oppressed countrymen who are fighting for their freedom when she finds that they have no interest in her help or charity. In all of these instances, the isolation is closely tied to the idea of speaking, or having a story told.

In this way, *Life & Times of Michael K* stands alone. Unlike several other protagonists of Coetzee's, Michael K struggles to exist *away* from all of his fellow citizens, resists several times the temptation of speaking, especially about himself, and refuses to have his story told, nor does he acknowledge having his story told for him. We can see examples of this during his internment in the Kenilworth camp, as he refuses to divulge his story to the medical officer (p. 138), who makes up his own story for the man (p. 141). Further, his repeated attempts to exist outside anyone else's structures as he makes a home in the mountains, abandons the farm when the Visagie grandson appears, and then returns to it, signify this same drive towards isolation. His desire to live away from people is a constant struggle against the forces of the ongoing war, and the system that has created the ruling class.

Narrative Structure, Speech, and Agency

Theresa Dovey specifically looks at the narrative aspects of the novel, understanding it as a departure or rewriting of what Nadine Gordimer calls an "evocation of commonplace misery" ("Idea of Gardening"). This is the story of the disadvantaged man who must, on top of his natural inabilities, suffer the racism, cruelty, and the injustice of the system in which he had the misfortune of being born. Gordimer's reading of the novel has had an impact on several critics' interpretations of the text. Dovey

writes of the text with this in mind,

If, in the mode of realism, Michael K is the victim of an oppressive and exploitative system, in the mode of text construction, he is the victim of a hierarchy of authorities, which range from the structural needs of the narrative and the prescribed codes of the genre, to the desire of both writer and reader, and to the ultimate *author*-ity of the discursive context, of language as Other. And if, in the mode of realism, the obscurity and mute presence of this type of protagonist offer the possibility of a story, of exposing to view what has up until now remained concealed, in the mode of text construction this same obscurity allows the writer to construct a figure of so little substance that s/he is able, in some measure at least, to elude this hierarchy of authorities, and to maintain the necessary concealment of the self. (pp. 267-268)

Throughout the text, we are treated to the major events of Michael's life and the surrounding regime that attempts to integrate him within its own system and his enforcement and maintenance of his own isolation. Yet, as he is being interrogated, we are interested in what Michael would say to the Medical Officer as he implores him to "Give yourself some substance, man" (*Life & Times*, p. 140). The need of a story is something the reader expects from the writer, yet in this instance, we see that the reader is merely invited to come closer and closer to the protagonist, to close the gaps between us and him, even though we have been with him every step of the way. Coetzee uses an unintrusive narrator, who keeps a certain distance and only at sparse times allows himself within the head of Michael K, and with the desire to be told a story, we can guess why: the medical officer's insistence that he has substance becomes ours as well. The limited understanding of the narrator becomes our limited understanding as well.

Notably, the narrator does not enter into Michael's head during his less understandable moments, or not to a degree that would allow the reader an easy explanation. We begin to see the emerging structure of writer/reader and writer/character, though Michael is able to keep his distance even in these relationships. The approach used here carries "the implication that the protagonist is a free agent: free from the shaping and controlling presence of the writer" (Dovey, p. 268). Carrol Clarkson also points out Coetzee's attention to the separation of author and character in his doctoral thesis ('Countervoices', p. 81).

Other characters attempt and fail to bridge this gap, as they repeatedly rename Michael, most notably Captain Oosthuizen and the Medical Officer calling him Michaels, in the latter case in spite of hearing his real name straight from the source (*Life & Times*, pp. 131-132). Robert and the stranger from Section III make an effort to get Michael to 'wake up'. The latter additionally calls him 'Mr. Treefeller' and says to him "'Tomorrow you will be a new man'" (p. 176). Dovey further points out two attempts to 'read' the story of Michael in Section III, by stealing his packet of seeds, and the prostitute-

sister who steals his 'seed' against his will in the bathroom (pp. 318, 321). The stranger attempts to understand the 'secret' of Michael, and resorts to theft to acquire and then dispose of the seeds he carries, losing many of them, in what she calls an attempt at "furtive and frustrated mastery" (p. 318) of the protagonist, trying to understand his motivations concretely, and finding identity there, something the readers may be tempted to do themselves.

If there is a distance between Michael and the rest of the characters and situations in this text, it seems to be the way he prefers it; nothing he is composed of is necessarily someone else's business. It would be normal to take a text like this, one that focuses so fully on the main character, and attempt to put a meaning to the main character as 'explained' before moving onto the next text, perhaps after taking some time to appreciate the metaphor, treating it as little more. However, Dovey says that through Michael, "Coetzee represents a mode of writing ostensibly *not* motivated by the need to bring the self into being [like Magda], but by the wish to give speech, and thereby life, to *another*, to an inarticulate being" (p. 290). In other words, the point of the text is not, as the medical officer would have it, to prescribe his own meaning onto Michael, to use him to fulfill pre-established aims. Rather, it is to allow the character himself to shine forth as an individual apart from the genre he has been written into. Clarkson also refers to "the danger of criticism [...] reducing the author's work to a static monologic ideal" (p. 81). If the entire message could be reduced to a few sentences or ideas, there would be no need for a novel.

We can see evidence of this idea in Michael's attempt at a suitable lesson to his story near the end, when he has come full circle back to Sea Point. Though he has somehow been convinced that his story needs a moral, he is apt and aware enough to understand that none truly fits. At first he looks for meaning to his life (p. 7), then when that does not work, he tries to see endings to his events throughout the rest of the story. At first when he kills the ewe, he thinks to himself, "The lesson, if there was a lesson, if there were lessons embedded in events" (p. 57). Then this happens again when he is in the camp, "He had a presentiment of a single meaning upon which [the scenes of life] were converging or threatening to converge, though he did not know yet what that might be" (p. 89). Finally near the end, "Is that the moral of it all, he thought, the moral of the whole story: that there is time enough for everything? Is that how morals come, unbidden, in the course of events [...]?" (p. 183). By teasing us with these meanings, Coetzee is daring the reader to go further and further in, and yet mocking the process by which a character can be reduced to a single meaning, spurring the reader to develop a more complex understanding of the text. There is even a slight reference to maintaining some distance

between signifiers and the signified, where the text states that Michael, looking for extended periods of time at "the roof-iron and the tracings of rust [...] he would see nothing but the iron, the lines would not transform themselves into pattern or fantasy" (p. 115) as he revels in the wonders of his idleness.

Patrick Hayes, however, is careful not to take this too far. It's important to note, he says, that: "far from wanting to escape from 'meaning' and 'binary thinking', as some commentators have suggested, Michael is in fact profoundly concerned to arrive at a distinctly metaphysical understanding of himself" (p. 99), and this desire of his may be an extension of his attempt to find meaning to his life after the death of his mother. The first example Hayes gives is early on, as Michael prepares to leave Sea Point, when he wonders what his purpose in life is. "The problems that had exercised him years ago behind the bicycle shed at Huis Norenius, namely why he had been brought into the world, had received its answer: he had been brought into the world to look after his mother" (*Life & Times*, p. 7). This, Hayes jokes, is not quite the exercise most boys would get hiding behind a bicycle shed. It is possible, however, that since Michael "does not have women friends" and "was easiest when he was by himself" (p. 4), he spends more of his time focusing on these issues. He also finds himself to be more concerned with why he exists if it is not to enjoy human interaction and grow to understand, as Magda does, that "It is not speech that makes man man but the speech of others" (*Heart*, section 239, p. 137). Michael comes to wonder if his place is within the weave of society.

What stops him from this understanding of himself is what he refers frequently to as a "gap" or a "hole" within himself that he is unable to fill. "Always, when he tried to explain himself to himself, there remained a gap, a hole, a darkness before which his understanding balked, into which it was useless to pour words" (p. 110). Perhaps this is the hole he is attempting to fill as he seeks out the purpose of his life, and the answer he is searching for when he occasionally stares at his hands?

Elleke Boehmer sees this search as a part of the system into which Michael was born (pp. 150-51). She remarks that from birth he has not been allowed a definition, always having to remain away from other children, "learning to be quiet" (*Life & Times*, p. 4). This is why it fascinates him later on in his life. Part of this can said to be his aforementioned inability to find a moral to his story, a meaning to his actions, but it can also be seen as a separation of himself from what he is able to see through the lens of others' eyes. As he is still unsure of his place in the world, or his purpose after he is no longer able to take care of his mother, he looks at himself through the scope of other characters for a definition. When Michael is talking to the generous man in Laingburg who picks him up off the street for a night, the narrator comments, "What the stranger saw [when looking at Michael] he did not

know” (p. 47). This curiosity of what he looks like to others occurs again later, in Jakkalsdrif, when staring at a guard, “Over the rim, his eyes met K's. What does he see? thought K. What am I to him?” (p. 82), and finally this is repeated once more to the medical officer, “I ask myself: what am I to this man?” (p. 148). In this he is able not to find the answer to his question either from those that would make him a part of their system or those that are simply charitable.

Dovey takes particular note of the significance of his physical deformity. "The fact that the harelip is *the* first thing that the midwife notices serves to specify the primacy of impaired speech, or inarticulacy, in a genre which makes the innocent victim the object of narration" (p. 284), purposefully frustrating the attempts to define or offer definition. In *Doubling the Point*, David Atwell picks up on this. Michael's inability to speak is a mirror for the inability of the author to speak fluently through him. Michael is unable to give his own story, because through him, the author as a descendant of the colonizer has no agency to speak for this group, and the burden of wielding this power, that of giving voice to the disaffected and disadvantaged, is far too great. "K is therefore Coetzee's muted affirmation of the freedom to narrate, to textualize" (p. 10), Atwell notes. This will also become a central issue in *Age of Iron*.

Dick Penner describes the text as an "awakening consciousness of a primitive mind" (p. 94). It's only when Michael gives up this attempt to define himself through others' eyes, and abandons the most charitable of the characters who are attempting to re-make him, that he comes to his final realization. His various self-definitions seemed hollow, too superfluous and unrelated. This final one becomes the only one he seems to find pleasure in: "It excited him, he found, to say, recklessly, *the truth, the truth about me. 'I am a gardener'* he said again, aloud," (pp. 181-182). He is still able to take care of his mother, he finds, because his initial understanding of his place being that of his mother's caregiver is not far off. Instead, as a gardener, he is here to take care of his mother Earth, which now contains the ashes of his mother and will continue to sprout life-giving fruit. And yet, that this happens, on a superficial reading, would suggest that this is what Michael has been working towards all along.

Politics

One of the most notable features of the text, at least to Dick Penner, is that the descriptor of race is quite apparently absent, and in Penner's interview with Coetzee, the author reveals about this absence that "Particularly in *Michael K* I am doing that very consciously" (p. 91). This serves the author the function of making the novel more universal, in that the figure of Michael could be anyone who is

being subjugated, and his oppressors could be anyone that is in the subjugating role, rather than being limited to the white on colored dynamic present in South Africa during the time of publication, much in the same way so many identifying details can be seen as strikingly absent from *Waiting for the Barbarians*. Penner further notes that "one tends to think of Michael K more in terms of his individuality than as a representative of any group" (*ibid.*), though Gordimer ("Idea of Gardening"), among others, does not see it in the same way.

It is easy to see a political position in the novel, from Michael's decision that "Perhaps the truth is that it is enough to be out of all the camps, out of all the camps at the same time. Perhaps that is enough of an achievement for the time being" (p. 182), to Robert's declaration that "'if we just grew thin and turned into paper and then into ash and floated away, they wouldn't give a stuff for us" (p. 88). Gordimer looks to the moment where Michael decides not to inhabit the house the Visagies established, and not to attempt to "found a new house, a rival line, on his small beginnings" (*Life & Times*, p. 104), which she calls "the concrete expression, through the creative imagination, of political debate about the future of South Africa under black majority rule: whether or not it should take over what has been the white South African version of the capitalist system" ("Idea of Gardening"). There is a point when Michael returns to the farm, after the Visagie grandson has left it, where Michael has a dream of

the Visagie boy, crouched in a ball in the dark beneath the floorboards, with spiders walking over him and the great weight of the wardrobe pressing down above his head, mouthed words, pleas or cries or orders, he did not know, that he could not hear or understand. [Michael] sat up feeling stiff and exhausted. Let him not steal my first day from me! he groaned to himself. I did not come back to be a nursemaid! He has looked after himself all these months, let him look after himself a little while longer! (p. 99)

This can be seen as the black majority coming back peacefully after the white ruling minority destroys themselves through their self-inflicted war. As a possible extension, when the white/colonizer society is in trouble, the black/colonized society, now liberated, will be so young and/or preoccupied with its own troubles that it cannot begin to come to any aid, nor does it have the moral obligation to do so. Looking strictly from a pro- or anti-apartheid standpoint, the message becomes clear, but it is not as easy as that.

From his position in his burrow, Michael is hardly in a position to take over anything, only to live while creating and suffering as little disturbance as possible. We can see this as a sign that he has not perfected his way of life, that he is still searching for his purpose at this point, still reconciling the separation from the affluent home owners of Sea Point, the social structure he has had to suffer and has now overcome. Not only does he not know how to help the Visagie boy, but he does not have any interest in doing so. We can compare this with the final scene of the book, where Michael avidly looks

forward to leading someone else to his way of life, excited at the prospect that he could find in the apartment a like-minded person in this war-torn country and guide him out to the veld and show him how "in that way, he would say, one could live" (p. 184). Having finally decided on his own meaning at the finale, he can be seen as ready to lead someone else into this way of life, living outside all of the camps simultaneously. In this way, we could say, he is ready to make a connection to someone else, not to eliminate his isolation, and his belief in it, but to consecrate it and his viewpoint on the ongoing war with a new 'recruit', of sorts. Moreover, it could be said that the system that made the hierarchy of races in South Africa cannot be fixed, it must just be left outright, escaped at all costs.

Hayes reads the 'rival line' passage as a different sort of separation from the colonial system, as a departure from Robinson Crusoe, who was given "one of those islands without an owner" (*Life & Times*, p. 61) that Michael is in search of and finds (more or less) on the Visagie farm. Crusoe starts out on the island by plundering the wreckage around him for everything which can be made use of in order to "civilize" his small plot of land. We see a direct comparison on page 104, "There was much else he could have taken to make life easier for himself: a grid, a cooking-pot, a folding chair, slabs of foam rubber, more of the feed-sacks [...] there was nothing for which he could not imagine a use. But he was wary of conveying the Visagies' rubbish to his home in the earth." We can now begin to see the role of isolation in the political context, and the importance of it.

Michael Valdez-Moses views Michael K's seeking isolation in some corner of his world as a separation from colonialism. Instead of looking at the world and its inhabitants and seeing what he can make of them, and how they can serve him, he sees the veld as belonging to no one, and he is only allowed to temporarily cultivate just enough food to keep himself alive. "'What grows is for all of us'," Michael says, "'We are all the children of the earth'" (p. 139). Both Dovey (pp. 284-285) and Penner (pp. 104-105) note the repeated references and descriptors to Michael as an animal of the earth upon which he walks. He even makes a mention of the Visagie grandson not having to be bothered by the blood of the dead birds he wants to eat, which is how separated he wants to be from the actual act of harvesting them himself. 'So small you don't taste it as it goes down,' he said [of visible blood]. 'You wouldn't get yourself dirty, not even your little finger'" (p. 63), bringing into the spotlight how little the boy is connected with the animals of his own farm. This can also represent the distance between the two that Visagie does not seem to notice, as without further guidance he begins to resort to the old master/slave manner of interaction when they first meet, unable or unwilling to transcend it when he finds his grandparents' abandoned land already being occupied and cultivated.

Clarkson reads Michael's refusal to establish a 'rival line' as a statement of the importance of those living on land to not try to possess it (*Countervoices*, p. 122). We can see an echo of this refusal to let the land belong to a person in a speech Coetzee gave a few years after publishing *Life & Times of Michael K*, that is when receiving the Jerusalem Prize in 1987, when he talks about the colonists of South Africa's failure of love for their country. Michael could be making up for this lack of love by his attempt to not leave a trace of himself. This can be reflected in his tools, which he determines "should be of wood and leather and gut, materials the insects would eat when one day he no longer needed them" (p. 104), or his burrow that he makes for himself, "not building a house out here by the dam to pass on to other generations. What I make ought to be careless, makeshift, a shelter to be abandoned without a tugging at the heartstrings"(p. 101). He concludes that, for himself, "it is a good thing that I, who have nothing to pass on, should be spending my time here, where I am out of the way" (p. 105). Finally, his desire to get away from all people and their causes could be a response to the large amount of fencing that has gone up that he must constantly dodge or escape, not only for the internment camps, but the standard farms as well, ones that are not even accepted by the populace's being contentious.

Robert's thoughts and arguments appear in Michael's own mental processes; Penner calls this "bad gardening" (p. 104). After thinking something unlike him, Michael wonders, "Would he have to say that the thought was Robert's and had merely found a home in him, or could he say that though the seed had come from Robert, the thought, having grown up inside him, was now his own?" (p. 95). Interestingly, several of the whites' crimes can also be seen as being a false sort of "planting". Early on, Michael steals food from an orchard, where "everywhere was evidence of neglect" when he finds only a small patch well tended next to the farmhouse (p. 39). At the very end of the first section, the soldiers dig up all of his pumpkins, and begin planting mines (pp. 125-126). Even the rebel soldiers, whom Michael initially glorifies, seem to be following a "scorched earth" military policy, leaving nothing alive behind, as they wipe out his crops by flooding the fields and "trampled the vines" (p. 111), eating all his crops, which is perhaps part of the reason he decides not to join them and serve them after all. Michael is not only a gardener, and not a soldier, but these passages prove that he must practice the proper form of gardening as well.

Near the end of the book, the medical officer remarks during "the big military parades there is always a company from the labor battalions [...] they march with spades on their shoulders, I notice, not guns" (p. 134). This passage can be read as a direct counter-point to the reflection on the possession of Robert's thought. As Robert attempts to get Michael to think one way, to foster his politics as a plant,

the medical officer attempts to pull him in the other direction, and make him one of the ones that gardens for the system that is in place. Michael's silence becomes a way to escape the debate altogether.

Hayes takes this as a sign that the novel is "Truly political 'in a deep sense'," that it "is opening differently positioned readers to the complex demands of the future: it is a seriously playful response to the demand for national icons" (p. 103). It would be hard to hold a portrait of Michael K up to the masses as a model to emulate, either for or against the pro- or anti-apartheid strugglers. As this for/against mentality pervaded so many during the time of publication, as it does characters populating the text, holding a distance from both is a way to force the reader to think about the issue more fully, and to realize that not all of the population may fit into those parameters. "Instead of setting out its own truth in a rivalrous fashion," Hayes says elsewhere, "Coetzee's text generates an equivocal and playful movement between the serious and the non-serious: it won't play the game any given reader wants it to play" (p. 101). Coetzee finds a way of approaching a deeply political question and applying to it a unique sense of kept distance, by not entering into either dialogue that all other characters seem eager to pull his character into.

While Penner notes the similarities between Michael and Lao Tzu (p. 97), Dovey says he is of so little substance that he escapes this hierarchy and conflict (p. 268). Could Michael be said to have established a full philosophical model with which those on a set side of the issue can act? Is Gordimer's suggestion that "Coetzee's heroes are those that ignore history, not make it" ("Idea of Gardening") valid? Or, when asking what Michael's brand of resistance is, does he simply remain mute? Does he have a political stance at all?

This begins to come back to Michael's seeming inability to talk and his harelip. Atwell sees Michael's physical deformity as central: "Marked with a harelip, K remains outside human intercourse and, by extension, outside the culture's various forms of entrapment" (p. 9). In addition to using physical distance to escape the system that would ensnare him, he does not even enter into the dialogue that has already been predefined by those who have created the system he escapes from. Michela Canepari-Labib notes that "in order to survive the system must create an Other. This is the reason why various representations of the system use every means to stop Michael from living out of time and space, in an attempt to integrate him" (p. 100). Certainly we can see evidence of this in *Jakkalsdrif*, as the medical officer constantly tries to bring Michael's health back up to inevitably enter the camp's system. However, interestingly, this is also present in the other work camps amongst fellow sufferers, as when the woman in *Jakkalsdrif* looks at him as a man from the Cape, and not someone that is

inherently in the same situation, even though they are both locked behind the gates (p. 79).

Penner goes beyond looking at Michael as an animal and draws a line between all of the references to him as a stone, separate from the world around him, "outside the forces of history and time" (p. 97). We can find several references to characters saying that they exist within the frame of history, though saying they wish to escape it or reflect on the misery such a position causes them. This starts with the Visagie grandson insisting, "I am at war with no one [...] there is no war here on the farm" (*Life & Times*, p. 64) to the medical officer describing himself as "a prisoner to this war", "in a state of waiting", "while history hesitated over what course it would take." (pp. 157-158). This becomes related to what the medical officer describes as the difference between "being" and "becoming". We can see both represented: within the throes of his idleness, Michael considers, "The story of his life had never been an interesting one; there had usually been someone to tell him what to do next; now there was no one, and the best thing seemed to be to wait" (p. 67). Around the same time, he reflects, "he had grown older and stopped wanting [...] His last years at Huis Norenius were the best [...] when he could slip off to his place behind the shed and be left alone" (p. 68). This issue is what makes this text, on at least one level, distinctly non-political, despite the heavily political setting: that Michael is not trying to live in a way that defines the world around him, not 'making history', not looking to "become" anything as he "closed his eyes, and emptied his mind, wanting nothing, looking forward to nothing" (*Life & Times*, p. 69). He is content with merely 'being', and the only way Michael sees simply 'being' to be possible is to do so alone, away from those trying to recruit him, in complete isolation.

Gordimer asks whether there is "an idea of survival that can be realized entirely outside a political doctrine?" (p. 2), but this is precisely what Michael does. While all of the characters seem to struggle hopelessly with "becoming" something, constantly looking forward to some change, it is only Michael who is able to realize his contentment, "being" as a stone, taking pleasure in his idleness, not attempting to change anything about the system except his involvement within it, and in this way, "Michael K can be said to have escaped historical event to enter a realm of being outside linear time." (Penner, pp. 98-99). It is clearly not a letter-for-letter prescription for the anti-apartheid struggle, but merely contains a spirit of rejection, going only so far as to say that the life prescribed under this regime is unlivable.

Time

In both this text and *In the Heart of the Country*, the protagonists are preoccupied with the concept of

time and their interaction with it. While Magda winds the clock, giving power to her narrative, the characters that populate it, and the landscape that surrounds them, Michael tries to fight and control time as little as possible. While I noted in the previous section the controlling nature of time itself, we can extend this to Michael's choice to exist outside of "all of the camps at the same time", one of which can be seen as the oppressive flow of time. He begins to exist at one with nature, from which it is only possible to tell the seasons and general time of day, and, like Michael, has little use for the arbitrary structures of time. Michael "did not know what month it was, though he guessed it was April. He had kept no tally of the days nor recorded the changes of the moon" (p. 115). He takes virtually no notice of the passage of time, except where it affects his planting, as the end of the summer (p. 112), or the shortening of days (p. 114).

Early on in the novel, while in the heart of the city, everything involving Michael is, if not based on the time, at least quite conscious of it: "At the age of fifteen", "three years later", "late one Friday", "one morning in June, in the thirty-first year of his life" (p. 4), "For eight years", (p. 6), "the eighteenth of August" (p. 9), and so on. As Michael moves further out of the police state of the Cape, he begins to lose track of all of this regimenting of time, and simply begins his "yielding up of himself to time, to a time flowing slowly like oil from horizon to horizon over the face of the world" (p. 115). This also comes to be in stark contrast with the implied passage of time between the entries in the medical officer's journal that he keeps as he looks over Michael. The initial impression here seems contradictory. How could Michael begin to notice time less while yielding himself up to it more?

His relations with time are always in terms of segments of it, whether in hours, days, months, or years. Until he gets out into the veld, sleeping in the mountain and in his burrow on the farm, Michael sees it in these terms. However, these are segments that are not naturally counted, and are the invention of man. In *Waiting for the Barbarians*, the Magistrate remarks "What has made it impossible for us to live in time like fish in water, like birds in air, like children? It is the fault of Empire! Empire has created the time of history" (p. 133). This is wrapped up with the Magistrate's understanding of his own story, as well as Michael's. Michael is unable to summon forth the words he wants, even in socially normal situations: "His heart was full, he wanted to utter his thanks, but finally the right words would not come" (p. 48), and when asked just to speak about himself, or things he has already been speaking about, "'I am not clever with words,' he said, nothing more", to which the medical officer responds, "We don't want you to be clever with words [...] we just want you to tell the truth!'", with Michael's response was that he "smiled back craftily." (p. 139). The reason is he would need to pull

himself forward from the rest of the world, define himself as apart from it, the "I" to the world's "You" or "They": where he has been on it, what he has done in it, in other words, what role he has played. This is not how Michael aims to live. Cutting up and dividing time is not in his interest, and he takes a more natural approach to it, like with his living conditions and tools: "Instead of listening to the crying of his body he tried to listen to the great silence about him" (p. 66). In yielding himself up to the world and time around him, he surrenders the needs and distinction of his body, his individual wants.

In every instance of Michael's understanding of the flow of time, it is combined shortly beforehand or afterward with descriptions of the sun washing over him or bliss in some sublime natural delight: "He did not [...] keep a record of the passage of days. There was nothing to look forward to but the sight, every morning, of the shadow of the rim of the mountain chasing faster and faster towards him till he was bathed in sunlight" (p. 68). This is one of the first yieldings of himself towards time, when he begins to be truly alone on the mountain. When he returns to the farm, it is abandoned, and in his languor, Michael uses his excess time to sleep, enjoying the world around him rather than trying to possess it. "All morning he would sleep. At noon he would begin to emerge into an interval of languor and waking dreams, bathed in a gentle warmth that radiated down from the roof" (p. 114); "all that was moving was time, bearing him onwards in its flow [...] he was living beyond the reach of calender and clock in a blessedly neglected corner, half awake, half asleep" (pp. 115-116). This becomes more intertwined with his love of the earth: "that was what it meant to say *the bounty of the earth* [...] He lost track of time" (p. 118). Additionally, "sometimes we would emerge into wakefulness unsure whether he had slept a day or a week or a month [...] But then he would relax again and stretch his legs and yawn in sensual pleasure so sweet that he wished for nothing but to lie and let it ripple through him" (p. 119).

What he yields himself to, then, is the 'natural' time of the world around him, and he becomes one with it, leaving behind the social structure that those in power are attempting to interpose between the people stuck within it. His devotion is clearly to the world outside the time of the Cape colony and the colonizing cities, and he moves to escape these places as a return to the natural time of the world, conceding to its rhythm, enjoying its bounty. His attempt is to maintain the connection to the earth if nothing else, to prevent it from the threat that "the earth would grow hard and forget her children" (p. 109). His insistence in the transience of his tools and burrow overlap this sentiment. His goal is that he should leave no mark on the world where it is not necessary, and should exist in a way that is a yielding to the natural forces of the world. If it must be in opposition to something, then it can be seen as in opposition to "all of the camps", the ideas within various political doctrines, and the "bad planting"

perpetrated by the police and the white farmers.

Dovey suggests that Michael's yielding of himself to time, escaping in this way, is wrapped together with the statements underlying his escape from narrative. While Michael's last possible moral is "that there is time enough for everything" (*Life & Times*, p. 183), Dovey responds, "There is 'time enough for everything' in the country because [...] this is the time *outside* time, outside the concept of temporality which is produced in and by the narrative" (Dovey, p. 323). She brings to attention Michael "as representative of *unconscious* meaning," saying he "has the potential to re-establish himself in the present moment of future *acts* of reading-as-narration, which are potentially infinite" (*ibid.*). Michael is again revealed to be in charge of his own narrative, though he yields and re-takes control several times, rather than being a central location for characters to express their viewpoints. "The capacity of the protagonist to *escape* the temporal structures of the narrative implies an escape from causality, from explanation" (Dovey, p. 290), she writes. The issues of Michael explaining himself and himself being explained by others both take a central role as he is moved forcefully into Section II.

The Medical Officer

From the beginning of the section, we can see how the medical officer is jaded with his work. He refers to "the second class" (p. 136) rather than race (though from this mention we can tell he is not a part of it), and describes the culmination of his work taking place "so that one day soon [Michael] can rejoin camp life and have a chance to march back and forth across the race track and shout slogans and salute the flag and practice digging holes and filling them again" (p. 133). He wonders "Do any of us believe in what we are doing here? I doubt it" (p. 134) and takes it hard on the system that has set up the camp. Looking around him, thinking of the end of the war, he ponders, "Or will the camp not close down even then, camps with high walls always having their uses?" (p. 147). Comparatively, in several situations, we can see that he is taking it easy on himself, when he considers his position in the war, and that of his friend Noel: "'But we are soft,' I suggest" (p. 132); "So, Michaels, the long and the short of it is that by my eloquence I have saved you" (p. 142); "I am the only one who can save you. I am the only one who sees you for the original soul you are. I am the only one who cares for you" (p. 151). He is sympathetic to Michael's difficulties in getting what he wants, or what he perceives it to be, and is interested in Michael's story because he sees his own plight in it. By the end, the medical officer expresses his desire to leave the camp and follow Michael out onto the flats, even if he doesn't quite understand why Michael is escaping. What's more, he is a potential audience to Michael's story, wanting it so badly that

on several occasions he demands Michael's story out of him. Michael has no choice but to continue his pursuit of isolation from even the most charitable of characters, who can be said to quite literally save his life; he even goes to such length to do so that at times he needs to fight Michael to do it. The question then becomes, to what extent can we support the medical officer's goals? Even if Michael must escape him too?

Throughout the section, the medical officer interests himself in one thing, and that is the story of Michael. It seems that he seeks to assuage the guilt of belonging to the ruling class by making a case out of Michael, by taking his story and adding it to his own understanding of "the second class" and integrating Michael, story and all, into the ruling class. In *South Africa and the Politics of Writing*, David Atwell provides a valuable historical context through which we can begin to understand Coetzee's shaping of the medical officer,

Life and Times of Michael K was published in 1983. Between the elections of 1981 and 1984, white South African politics was dominated by a debate about 'multinationalism.' [...] For the present purposes, the most remarkable aspect of this development was the government's apparent belief that it could create and impose a constitution aimed at achieving greater legitimacy without taking into account the objections of black leaders of almost every constituency. (p. 90)

The medical officer shares several of the apparent sympathies here, being interested in limited reform within the established system. What he does not seem to fully realize or accept is his position within it.

As the section progresses, Michael sees the similarities the medical officer shares with the police and soldiers that captured him so many times. The medical officer makes it clear that they, whether first or second class citizens, exist under the same iron laws: "Did you think you were [...] a creature beyond the reach of the laws of nations? Well the laws of nations have you in their grip now: they have pinned you down in a bed [...] they will grind you in the dirt if necessary. The laws are made of iron, Michaels, I hope you are learning that. No matter how thin you make yourself, they will not relax" (p. 151). From his position, the medical officer cannot see a way outside of the system to which he belongs, and assumes Michael is going to be similarly bound, realizing what opportunity Michael had only when he is gone, and even then not entirely. Clearly he is bound by the same laws as Captain Oosthuizen and the soldiers who robbed and captured him, and is not looking for a way out, only to change the entire system.

But the medical officer does not actually stop to understand Michael's story, and is constantly attempting to fill in the gaps himself. His misconceptions of Michael's mother (pp. 150, 162) prove this. Additionally, though the medical officer comments several times on how Michael does not fit in

anywhere, as Penner notes, both "he and Noel insist on regarding [him] as a plurality, 'Michaels'" (p. 108), a representative of his own group. When it is time for Michael to leave, and the medical officer considers joining him, he still views his former patient as a model for others to follow to salvation; the change is that he doesn't think the second class citizens should follow him anymore, but the disenfranchised first class citizens. It seems many of the medical officer's comments intend to understand him in light of this predisposition to see Michael as a model. Coetzee has remarked that the medical officer is viewed as "someone out of the Empire" (p. 109), someone that gives the counterview to the anti-apartheid struggle.

The medical officer offers us a unique perspective in the book, one that is used to make a distinct point. A description by Stephen Watson of Coetzee's other early protagonists is also applicable to the medical officer, that he is "a coloniser who is an intellectual, but a coloniser who does not *want* to be a coloniser" (p. 22). Watson continues, he has "the insatiable hunger [...] for ways of escaping from a role which condemns them as subjects to confront others as objects in interminable, murderous acts of self-division" (p. 23), and this seems to be a logical extension of the first quote, but it is actually less clear. Ironically, there is only one thing he tends to be satisfied with, and that is Michael *after* he has left, after he has safely missed his opportunity to follow him into the flats (as he guesses). In this way, he's happy to create these ideological separations between himself and those around him, but never actually chooses to close them when given almost exactly what he wants. This division would seem to serve him as well as his position: he can disagree all he wants, but never requires himself to do anything about it that would make a significant difference in anyone's lives. This could be another example of him taking it easy on himself and hard on everyone else.

The medical officer can also be seen as an agent of the camp, as he tries to transform Michael bodily into something he is not ("Why do you want to make me fat?" (p. 135)), and mentally as well ("six hundred sullen men standing to attention [...] having their thinking set straight. A year ago we were still trying to make them sing" (p. 132)). There's actually a scene where we can see that the medical officer's obsession with Michael's story is complicating his interaction with the authorities in the camp. During the interview/interrogation scene (pp. 137-142), all of the medical officer's attempts to get Michael to talk meet only with stony resilience, and all the protestations that he is offering help are not believed or accepted. Noel begins to ask Michael several questions straight out which he responds to diligently. Once he sees progress, the medical officer interrupts the process again and, as he raises the wrong subject, he brings the interview to a halt. Can he be said to be in favor of finding these

answers out, or is he being aggressive enough simply to convince himself that these answers are what he wants?

Arnt Bohm points out that the medical officer can be seen as a counterpart to the school master at Huis Norenius, forcing the pupils to solve problems that were not necessary to their lives. He writes of the rules governing silence in the dorms as a control over personal and private conversation within the institution. This is similar to the control the medical officer attempts to wield over Michael, commanding him to talk on command, and tell his story, parts of which the medical officer expresses doubt towards anyway (*Life & Times*, p. 142). "Silence or the correct answer: those were the only two possibilities [...] Personal elements have no value in the category of 'correct answer'" (Bohm, *Coercion*). The reason is that the camp changes people into what it wants or needs them to be. The "pharmacist turned makeshift medical officer" (p. 162) has already made a huge leap between his training and his work. The medical officer also tells Michael that Noel has come out of retirement to run the camp (pp. 138-139). The medical officer, accordingly, is interested in consigning Michael into the labor battalion, marching with a spade over his shoulder, regardless of how pessimistic he appears about the prospect. Even if he ridicules the idea, he doesn't replace it with anything substantial.

Slowly he begins to ignore this notion, which is otherwise his purpose in this camp, and begins trying to put down into words the point of Michael. Each time he fails, he amends his view and tries again, first thinking that Michael is "an idiot" (p. 131), and then viewing him as a child, "I cannot really think of him as a man, though he is older than me by most respects" (p. 135); "the weakest pet duckling [...] or the runt of the cat's litter, or a fledgling expelled from the nest" (p. 142). Then he begins to see him as "an original soul [...] a human soul above and beneath classification, a soul blessedly untouched by doctrine, untouched by history" (p. 151), but adds "no one is going to remember you but me, unless you yield and at last open your mouth" (p. 152). He returns to calling him "a rudimentary man" (p. 161), and then lastly "an allegory [...] a meaning [taking] up residence in a system without becoming a term in it" (p. 166). Finally, we see that the way the medical officer comes to understand Michael is as a meaning for himself, rather than an individual. The purpose of Michael, he decides, is to express to him a truth of the universe, not for Michael to pursue what is clearly making him happy. It's also odd that he expresses more doubt over his understanding of Felicity (p. 158), someone who actually matters very little, than Michael. He always expresses confidence at understanding his patient's significance, being able to 'read' him at a glance. "The doctor [sic] does not ask for anything other than Michael's submission to his will," Canepari-Labib goes on to note (p. 101), and at all turns, we see the officer

wanting something out of Michael, needing something to allow the medical officer to escape this system. As noted above, however, this is not actually something he is interested in.

"In his obscurity," Dovey notes, "his adherence to no code, his allegiance to no system, his commitment to no course, K offers a model of resistance which the medical officer" recognizes as a resistance in absence, definable by what he does not do (p. 310). Valdez-Moses also recognizes this peculiar form of resistance, arguing that Michael's reluctance to tell his own story is a rejection of empowering the listener (p. 139) and by keeping his story to himself, he denies the medical officer to take a part of him, his history, which he fears would be changed and distorted. Michael's constant insistence that he is not "clever with words" suggests that he fears he would lack the eloquence to maintain control of his story were he to express it aloud, against those who would commandeer it, even if he chose to.

Watson views this desire of getting something from Michael as another form of colonialism, "whether it be the colonisation of the body (through labor camps) or the colonisation of the mind (through charity)" (p. 14). This is clearly visible in the medical officer, enticing Michael to give up his story as he holds saving his life over him, even though he has done it against his patient's will (pp. 140, 145, 151). Rita Barnard agrees: "The medical officer creates rather than 'reads' the story of Michael K" (p. 45). We see the medical officer's propensity for needing a story out of his patient during the interrogation scene. The fact that he makes one up for him as he exits the interrogation room becomes significant, Bohm argues, since "the doctor [sic] has no difficulty in spinning out the yarn [about Michael], because all that is required is that it satisfy the criteria set by the audience [the Castle]" (Bohm, *Coercion*). Additionally, we can even see when the medical officer is confronted with the correct story, he does not believe it: "'As for your mother, I am sure you have not told the full story and I am sure you know that.'" (p. 136). The problem is that it does not fulfill the medical officer's desired level of significance towards the world.

At the closest he is able to approach Michael, the officer is safely in a vision, where nothing is risked (and nothing gained). The officer imagines him running across the Cape Flats to resume his solitary lifestyle. However, we can see that he is finally wrong again, as to reach the Flats, Michael would have to go to the south and east, but instead, he has gone to Sea Point, which is situated directly to the northwest of Kenilworth.

By the time the medical officer pleads with Noel, telling him, "'I have watched him, I know!'" (p. 142), we see the baselessness of his assertions, and are invited to counter-argue, "No you haven't,"

as we the audience continue to struggle to understand Michael, and indeed, Michael himself struggles to do so as well. In this way, the medical officer believes he is closer to Michael than those above him, who do not understand him. In reality, however, there exists a wide gap between the two, one the medical officer is not able to overcome, either because he is not fully willing to undertake non-compliance with the regime and all the things it would entail, or because he has been raised with a sympathetic view of the second class citizens and is merely seeking to confirm it. Ultimately, he is unable to come to an accurate conclusion by the final page of the section. The reason for Michael's escape becomes his astute observation of this pattern in the medical officer's thinking, who is still, determinedly, calling him the wrong name.

Canepari-Labib notes three distinct problems with the renaming of Michael. Not only does it suggest the officer's colonization, but it is "pointing to identity's linguistic nature, and emphasising the system's refusal to grant the individual any recognition" (p. 203). The act of renaming him harkens back to the new names given to the slaves as they arrived at the Cape. Though the officer knows Michael's name, and even corrects himself once (p. 138), he continues to utilize the name given to him by Captain Oosthuizen almost immediately, and not Michael himself, which not only defines him as an 'opgaarder', an arsonist, a criminal, but most of all, as an enemy, and an Other. Either the medical officer is unable or unwilling to bridge this gap which holds Michael forever at arm's length. It's possible that he is unwilling to, seeing some good still present in figures like himself, Felicity, and Noel, and cannot consider the benefit of giving up the little good he sees in his own side of the ongoing war. However, it is important to note that he is younger than Michael, and as long as both have been alive, he no doubt has been taught the separate development system of the apartheid regime; regardless of his attentions, Michael will always be an 'other', one who will never be fully equal.

Section III

The final section of the text gives us the close of Michael's self-definition, and possibly his life. We see by the end that Michael is approached by the stranger and his sisters who practice another form of charity on him, which he is determined to run away from. In a way, this part of the text can be seen as Michael's inevitable death. He enters the section under "brilliant morning light" (p. 171) and refers to himself as "So light now that he could not even be sure his feet were touching the ground" (p. 180). The violence of the area plaguing the beginning of the book and encouraging his initial departure has completely vanished, replaced by girls sunbathing in bikinis. He has returned cyclically to his mother's

apartment, where the novel began, looking at a teaspoon as a source of life (pp. 3, 184), and keeps with him all of the things he values: the sun, his seeds, and then finally wine and his long denied pleasure, which he does not take as pleasure at all, a woman. He begins to see the destruction of the apartments built for the servants at Sea Point, brought down by the people the system attempted to oppress. He then approaches a position, though he is still unable to articulate it, where he is set enough and confident enough in his understanding of his way of life to give it a label and guide another like-minded person into the future of his preference of an isolated life. The forced interaction of the stranger and the prostitute as rejections of human intercourse and the loss of his seeds and 'seed' instead reinforce his ascetic life. Instead, his pursuit is of the rebuilding of the single most valuable connection humankind has, that of theirs to the mother earth and has apparently forgotten.

Despite this imagery, in an interview Coetzee says that Michael should not "emerge from the book as an angel" (quoted in Penner, p. 110). Hayes sees the introduction in the sun in a similar way, in that the first paragraph of the final section "lets us start to see Michael in a heroic light, as someone with a serious purpose, and then this truth flickers out, pushed up against, in this case, the decidedly non-serious hedonistic milieu of the seaside." (p. 84). Though Michael is seen as "a visionary figure" in this section, Hayes notes that his desires are "infantile" and what he receives at long last are "insignificant experiences" (pp. 88-89). He expresses a desire to eke out a living with a teaspoon of water, and suggests that his mistake "was not to have plenty of seeds, a different packet of seeds for each pocket: pumpkin seeds, marrow seeds, beans, carrot seeds, beetroot seeds, onion seeds, tomato seeds, spinach seeds. Seeds in my shoes too, and in the lining of my coat" (p. 182). We can go back and compare this with the stranger's stealing of his seeds (p. 176) and the forced sex of the prostitute (p. 178). The charity that is practiced upon him actually takes him further away from where he wants to be, tending a garden rather than drinking wine at a party. If Michael is forced to accept charity, then his desires become dictated by the person or institution giving him the hand-out. While in some cases he absolutely needs it (the medical officer keeping him alive), he is unable to develop himself into a 'gardener' until he is able to take care of himself, and develop in his own way. The socio-political analogy emerges: what can the upper class expect out of its oppressed citizens if the upper class forces them to take what they are given? This becomes another instance of the benefits of (controlled) isolation.

Michael begins to see these strangers as giving him charity as well, and seeks to isolate himself from it: "I have escaped the camps; perhaps, if I lie low, I will escape the charity too" (p. 182). The

stranger repeats a line of Robert's, about "waking up" (pp. 88, 173), and there are several more attempts to get Michael's story out of him. However, he is hardly given the time to answer, nor is he pressed when he does not say much, as in *Kenilworth*. However, the stranger and the sisters are mistaken about Michael from the beginning, as they frequently refer to him as "Mr. Treefeller" which can be said to be almost the exact opposite of his chosen occupation, if he can be said to have one. The stranger also outlines the goal of making "'a new man out of you'" (p. 175), and steals Michael's packet of seeds, wasting half of them, trying to remove what was central to his identity. The purpose of this can possibly be to find out Michael's story, even though he destroys it in the process. The prostitute's actions can be understood as a manifestation of the stranger's desire for Michael, how he will constitute Michael's identity. He tells Michael, "'It is difficult to be kind [...] to a person who wants nothing.'" (p. 179). We may question what it is the stranger wants out of Michael, as his theft of the packet of seeds points clearly to the idea that it is not simply a matter of his generosity. After the prostitute takes his other 'seeds' the man promises to take him to a party, "'where there will be plenty to eat'" (*ibid.*), something Michael is not interested in, and he escapes again before he is obligated to attend.

We can see these two events as reinforcing Michael's pursuit of isolation, as what it has come to stand for has been tried and proven again. He reflects, while alone, that

He had the feeling that something inside him had let go or was letting go. What it was letting go of he did not yet know, but he also had a feeling that what he had previously thought of in himself as tough and rope-like was becoming soggy and fibrous, and the two feelings seemed to be connected. (p. 177)

This passage can support the death reading mentioned above, but it can also suggest that he is momentarily letting go of his need to escape from the world around him, and is becoming more pliant. The violence in the area has apparently disappeared, and he no longer needs to hide (and, at the moment, does not know he needs to escape the stranger further). Dovey reads this section as "enact[ing] a gesture where K is released into the world to achieve his meaning there, and is the counter proof to the medical officer's statement that 'this will be the end of the story of Michaels'" (p. 317). We can also see by the end that he is able to make a connection to another person, willing to finally share his story, and perhaps listen to the other's, or not demand it from him. Why is he able to make this connection when characters like Magda and Mrs. Curren are not able to? Michael is and has been working on a self-definition, and under the proscribed developmental path that has been laid out for him since his birth, he was not able to discover this calling as his own. The development of the next generation is noted by Canepari-Labib: "It is always to future generations that [the text] hints by

referring to the importance that seeds have for Michael [...] no arrest follows Michael's last flight [...] it might also point to his final victory over the system and his success in leading a life closer to nature" (p. 275).

Dovey notes how the three statues Michael finds refer to his condition in all three sections of the book, first as an innocent deer, then as a gnome (corresponding directly to the medical officer calling him "a figure of fun, a clown, a wooden man" (p. 149)), and finally Pinocchio, the boy who has abandoned his parents and gone on to find the meaning of himself, which Michael does on the following page (Dovey, 322). We can see his development outlined here, and it leads back to what he ultimately determines: he is and has been a gardener.

As Michael approaches the end of the text, he begins to refine his strategy, re-understand himself, and come to a purpose that he can hold onto. What he comes to is that his strategy has worked, and he has come back to his start, ready to make the journey again. He also finds evidence of another man who could be disregarding the curfew, who could also be appreciative of his way of life. Whether dead or not, Michael's isolation will continue, as he is keeping himself apart from the world of camps and those who made them, who are not interested in the continuation of mankind and their place on the earth, but rather, for some political purpose that even active participants cannot remember. It's by continuing on his path of isolated renewability that he is able to continue towards his chosen life, and bring someone with him. His final image is arriving at the pump of the farm, the one the soldiers had blown up, and after they have left, he clears their rubble and manages one teaspoon of water at a time, nourishing himself from the earth the same way his mother used to feed him when he was young (p. 3), "and in that way, he would say, one can live" (p. 184).

Conclusion

After struggling with the menace of isolation in *In the Heart of the Country*, Coetzee finds a way to turn it into a vision of the future, held outside the political turf and hopeful in the face of such inequality. Rita Barnard doesn't seem surprised that a gardener should be the herald of South Africa during the turbulent 1980s; the Cape colony was originally established as a garden and supply station for passing ships on the way to and from the far east (*Dream Topographies*, p. 50). The image of the gardener is where the Cape began, and it is how it will continue. The opposite of war is not, in this case, peace, but cultivation, and growth.

David Atwell notes that "In a frenzied culture such as South Africa's [...] every sign, no matter

how innocent, becomes a signifier at another level, pointing to the lesser conflict" (*Politics of Writing*, p. 100). In most of the substantial parts of the text, it could be easy to forget about the fairly innocuous epigraph taken from Heraclitus, that "War is the father of all. / Some he shows as gods, others as men. / Some he makes slaves, and others free."

The decision to include this as an overarching idea for the novel, what should accompany the reader as an idea as they begin, puts particular weight on the dichotomy of the people in war. We can understand Michael as one of the slaves, but upon review, it seems impossible to understand which of the characters is free. The medical officer is pressed down by the weight of the system to which he belongs, as is Major Noel van Rensburg, and Captain Oosthuizen as well (as he screams about his regulations, which have come from higher up), and all the other members of the military and the concentration camp. It appears that the only character who may be said to be free is the generous man in Laingsburg who is gone in a single page. However, it's through his isolation that Michael struggles to be free: free of the war, the camps, the charity too, and finally of the political regime. He also escapes the new regime and the political action his South African readers of 1983 want to read into him, and the narrator, who is not able to get at his meaning any quicker than Michael himself.

Chapter 3: *Age of Iron*

For his sixth novel, *Age of Iron*, Coetzee examines the position of an elderly classics teacher diagnosed with cancer. For her, the day she is invaded by the disease is auspicious in that she is visited by a vagrant (or, as she puts it, “A visitor, visiting himself on me on this of all days” (*Iron*, p. 3)). After a seizure, he helps her by bringing her into the house, crossing the threshold into her life. As he slowly takes his position inside the house, she attempts to understand his position in her life, as well as that of her domestic servant Florence, and her children. As she witnesses what the times of the novel are doing to them, and making them into, Mrs. Curren begins to realize just how little she understands about the world around her, and just how isolated she really is and has been.

In her reading of *Life & Times of Michael K*, Nadine Gordimer recognized in Coetzee his distaste for the directly political struggle and message so prevalent in the literature of the day. She stated that the reader can see a “revulsion against all political and revolutionary solutions [...] I don't think the author would deny that it is his own revulsion” (“Idea of Gardening”). We can see this continued in *Age of Iron*, as Mrs. Curren is fully conscious of the political issues of her time, even, while she watches the state leaders on TV, going so far as to approach their broadcast “standing, as I always do when they speak, as a way of keeping what I can of my self-respect (who would choose to face a firing-squad sitting down?)” (pp. 8-9). She refers to the speakers as “they” and though she can speak Afrikaans, does not consider herself complicit with the system. This is not a distinction many characters seem to share, and she slowly comes to see herself in a new light as she is forced to bear witness to the persecution of Florence's children. She tries to reach out to the children, but is unable to do so, and is forced to watch them die, as she relates all of her impressions and thoughts to her daughter who has moved to America, refusing to come back until the state leaders are out of power. “[The daughter] will come back when they are hanging by their heels from the lamp-posts, she says. She will come back then to throw stones at their bodies and dance in the streets” (p. 68). The daughter, unlike the mother, has put herself into exile. This is a step of direct non-compliance, and, as we shall see, one Mrs. Curren is unable to take. If her position politically is against the people she sees on her TV, the ministers and “onderministers” of the ruling class, those that enact the ideas behind apartheid, then why can she not participate more actively in the struggle against them? What does this say about her resolve? What does it say about the struggle itself? What distance has she actually achieved for herself

from them? The uncertainty becomes quite visible when Bheki and John enter the fight themselves.

Many of the themes Coetzee has been struggling with and exploring in his earlier works reappear in this novel, and continue throughout his entire oeuvre. Michael K's inability to speak referred to his chosen position away from the political strife which defined the world around him and who he was within it, but he chose to separate himself for the express purpose of liberating himself completely. He chose to isolate himself physically in the veld, and mentally away from the definition of others, alongside his own story and history, as noted before in chapter 2 of this thesis. Elizabeth Curren, on the other hand, is unable to get anyone to listen to her. Though she has much to say to those around her, all of the characters find her position troubling and do not take her words seriously. "She has nothing to say," Philip Wood notes, "that her servant, Florence, or Bheki, or John, or Mr. Thabane can respond to, that can stir them out of their indifference to her and her plight as an exceptionally decent person horrified by what she has been condemned to be guilty of" (p. 195). What she chooses to express is not a message the other characters are generally interested in hearing or absorbing enough to alter their actions in any way.

A Woman, Old and White

Several times throughout the book, Mrs. Curren is unable to command attention to herself when she has something worthwhile to say. We are only able to listen as her writings spill out onto the pages of her letter, which comprises the entirety of the novel, and so much of the novel's events and meaning revolve around instances where she attempts to make use of her voice. Amongst others, the scene when she is in the hospital and finds John shows her ineffectiveness, as she remarks, "My words fall off him like dead leaves [...] he knew I was there [...] he knew and did not listen" (pp. 72-73). The ideas, partly from her own personal plea for recognition of her difference from the ruling party, are useless. John even fears the touch of Mrs. Curren, and "he put his good hand under the sheet, in case I should touch it again" (p. 74), the touch being something he is unable to deny. She is able to understand his deadening to her words, as those from "a woman, therefore negligible; of an old woman, therefore doubly negligible; but above all of a white" (p. 72). Through his eyes, she sees herself as all of the things he has grown up to hate, and she is too calloused to not be generalized about. To him, all the whites are his enemy, and the onus is on them to absolve themselves of this stigma; Mrs. Curren has not yet done enough.

The question becomes how separate Mrs. Curren really is? Sue Kossew points out that as a

white woman in this social setting, Mrs. Curren is “half-colonised”, rather than “double-colonised”, being a lesser citizen as a woman in a patriarchal society, while a colonizer of the oppressed races as well. This implication here is that a woman in this position has some exercise of power, and thus some choice whether to use this power in an effort to help the state or hinder it. Kossew calls this position “a distinction which is vital to an understanding of the speaking position of Coetzee's woman narrators” (p. 168), toeing the line between coloniser and colonised. We can see this, Dominic Head points out, during the scene in *Gugulethu*, as “she is rebuffed by both the black community, and the security forces, and her words of incipient moral growth are dismissed or ridiculed” (p. 130). She even agrees with the man who calls her lamentations “Shit” and the man she talks to from the security forces very bluntly tells her “No” when she tells him to leave in order to help his soul (pp. 91, 98). “I had expected incomprehension,” she notes, “but no, he understood exactly what I meant” (*ibid.*).

The castigation within the black community is led by Mr. Thabane, who seems adept at guiding her through the game of speech, of questions and answers to the logical conclusion of her recognizing the black community's plight. Interestingly, though, we can look at this episode as similar to the medical officer's plight in *Life & Times of Michael K*. Throughout Michael's stay at the Kenilworth racetrack, the medical officer continues to tell him that relinquishing himself is the only hope, but Michael refuses for fear of losing exclusive control over his story. We, as witnesses and partial evaluators of Mrs. Curren's plight, can also look at Mr. Thabane's rhetorical guiding of Mrs. Curren, which she notices too: “What he is doing to me he has practiced in the classroom. It is the trick one uses to make one's own answer seem to come from the child. Ventriloquism, the legacy of Socrates, as oppressive in Africa as it was in Athens” (pp. 90-91). While this could be read as mental colonialism in the same vein as the medical officer, it is more likely indicative of the lack of interest of the black community she is speaking to, or their lack of preparation for any reconciliation with the other side: in this way they make themselves equals with their opposition, searching not for a middle ground but a way to use their enemies' weapons against them. Thabane's understanding of Mrs. Curren as a member of the oppressing class is made clear shortly thereafter, as he tells her, “your boys are here to protect you.’ And he pointed. I saw them then, further down the road: three khaki-brown troop carriers” (p. 93). The community that Thabane belittles her in front of has been drawn into the binarism of the coloniser mindset: us or them; for or against. In patriarchal colonial society, Mrs. Curren finds herself isolated as a dissenting female voice, and as a white, she cannot claim allegiance with the oppressed either.

The uselessness of her words appears in two more central scenes, starting when John comes to

her for help. “Talk, talk!” she says for him, interpreting his silence, “Talk had weighed down the generation of his grandparents and the generation of his parents. Lies, promises, blandishments, threats [...] Not he. He threw off talk. Death to talk!” (p. 132). And yet she is unable to entreat the policemen to spare John's life a few pages later. She comes to realize that she is powerless amongst those the black community consider her to be closest to, the Afrikaners, the true enemy, whom she describes as “drinking from the cup of bitterness” (p. 142). Her lack of non-complicit action is her bitterness, while John being shot will be theirs. To John, she is ineffectual, not worth the truth or his trust; to them she's merely seen as crazy: “‘Sy's van haar kop af’” (p. 143) they remark: 'She's off her head'.

The powerlessness she experiences is a major theme of the book. Kossew sees this as linked to the several mentions Mrs. Curren makes of the doll motif, saying that the “implication is that by cutting themselves off from reality, the white colonisers have remained as children, asleep in a doll-like unreality” (p. 175). This is indeed a strong statement if that is what it is to mean, reducing the purpose the Afrikaners felt to be theirs down to a child's foolish fantasies, rather than engaging them on an ideological level.

While in the beginning Mrs. Curren seems to separate herself from that same childish identity, she begins to use the imagery in reference to herself. She describes her plea to go home to Mr. Thabane as “from an old person's throat a child's voice” (p. 100). She also refers to herself as “doll-folk”, and “not babies but the ideas of babies, more round, more pink, more blank [...] living not life but an idea of life” (pp. 102, 101). Head notes that she also refers to Bheki and John as children, though Mr. Thabane strategically chooses the word “youth” (Head, p. 135), attributing to them the righteousness of comradeship. “Children scorning childhood,” she says of them early on, “the time of wonder, the growing-time of the soul. Their souls, their organs of wonder, stunted, petrified. And on the other side of the great divide their white cousins soul-stunted too, spinning themselves tighter and tighter into their sleepy cocoons” (p. 6). Stunted, and refusing the tutelage of the rest of history and countless other countries around the world at the time the text takes place (the State of Emergency between 1986-1989), we can see the colonisers as lacking an important phase of growth, that during which one learns to be tolerant and empathetic of the others around them. Using faulty child-logic; and refusing to share: share their country, wealth, and security, even with others that occupy the same borders, those that they have no choice but to live with.

While this may be the case, it could be argued that those who are against the actions of the government are as weak and helpless as children, their strength being taken by those who play with

them, forcing them to do things which they may not agree with. This casts the Afrikaners in a new light as well, that they are an army not of colonizers, but those that have been victims too long, and are subject to the whims of the ministers and onderministers at the beginning, and the ideas of apartheid that they have forced into the society they govern. After all, they are only shown on TV, a one way-transmitting device which keeps a set distance, and there is a distinct mention of the police woman's being "bred" to be a good wife during the siege of her house. This observation of her grooming brings to the forefront that even this police woman, one in such a position of power, is made within something larger than herself, and within that society, has had to respond to this shaping by becoming a good wife rather than a good police officer.

Head also looks specifically at Mrs. Curren's mother's dream under the ox-wagon as "the plunging ox-wagon of a child's nightmare, [used] as a metaphor for decolonization, links Mrs. Curren's sense of childhood to recent colonial history" (p. 135). This leads to a vacuum in her life and development, he claims, separating her from a normal life, and instead substituting hers for the life of a doll. She notes early on that her primary purpose is to give, something she begins to lack as her daughter is gone: "To be full enough to give and to give from one's fullness: what deeper urge is there?" (p. 7). But her speech brings into stark focus how little she is able to give, not only from her own lack of agency in her position, but because those around her are forming a nation of stunted children.

Identity and a Public Death

Despite what she says, Mrs. Curren's difficulties with her personal identity are mentioned in conjunction with Mrs. Curren's struggles to define herself in an identity that fits on a national scale. Canepari-Labib calls her "a privileged Afrikaner who has become an accomplice of the system" (p. 205), while Benita Parry argues that Mrs. Curren's "terminal illness is detached from the demise of a malignant social order" since the circumstances of her death occupy "a different discursive space from the story of South Africa's bloody interregnum" (p. 59). The possibility of her salvation, argues Parry, removes her from the traditional liberal-humanist portrayal.

This is a difficult position to take on Parry's part, since it does wrap up rather nicely with her (commonly understood) death at the end of the book and the changing of the times in a historical context. Do we consider this as a failed salvation, where she was tested at the moment where John was under threat, and she was unable to intervene to save him, or herself? Or do we look at this as her being

trapped by fate, merely displaying her powerlessness as a dying woman? The very first line of the novel where the reader meets Mrs. Curren is framed as she receives her specter of death and must deal with the annoyance of a vagrant of another race. This echoes strongly with the South African state as seen from the white perspective. The early juxtaposing of her and her daughter is also quite clear, and she even states that the old must die to make room for the new. Her path through the text follows too closely the fate of her nation to look at them as necessarily separate. Symbolically, it is more meaningful than if she is simply a private old white woman with liberal viewpoints who happens to be reevaluating her life in the wake of news that it will soon end.

The references to her private death and the inevitable death of the state are related to the topic of shame, usually hers but often with attention given to the state as well. “At one moment I think: Let me hurry to put an end to it, to this worthless life. At the next I think [...] Is it my doing that my times have been so shameful?” (p. 107), she says to Vercueil as he is getting excited about her finally deciding to end her life. Additionally, she explains to John, “I have cancer from the accumulation of shame I have endured in my life. That is how cancer comes about: from self-loathing the body turns malignant and begins to eat away at itself” (p. 132). The shame she refers to always has a twin possession to it, existing under and between her and the state. The actual feeling of shame is hers, but it's brought on by the state, which she blames for spoiling her life “the way that a rat or a cockroach spoils food without even eating it, simply by walking over it and sniffing it and performing its bodily functions on it” (p. 107). Mrs. Curren wishes to see herself as removed from the functions of the ruling class, but it's through her that we see the faults, and through her that we feel the rage and protest of the ruling class's actions and the shame of having to live with these actions, under the Union of South Africa flag, in their capital city. Her presence repeatedly bears witness to the ruling class's crimes, giving the opposition voice, but not actively fighting them either.

As Mrs. Curren prepares herself for suicide, she notes that “The crab had stopped gnawing” (p. 106), that finally she was going to put an end to her suffering at the hands of the state acting through her name for its crimes. However, a few pages later, she recognizes that “dying in bed over weeks and months, in a purgatory of pain and shame, will not save my soul” (p. 129) any more than self-immolation, the suggestion being that the pain of extended suffering and a slow death amounts to less than a pound of flesh, and that it is insufficient to compensate for all of the pain it had caused. However, there is a hint of equality in this statement, between Mrs. Curren and the state, that they are not as separated as she initially supposed. Stine Bjarnar states that “the body is similarly given a

historical context and a political force through Mrs. Curren's belief that she has cancer from the 'accumulation of shame I have endured in my life.'" (p. 20). This is another reason to think of the narrative body as representative not only of her but the state. Her decision draws her to self-immolation, but when it is time for her to burn herself, and Vercueil offers her the match, she turns away, feeling forced: "It was like being trapped in a car with a man trying to seduce you and getting cross when you did not give in" (p. 112). This is emblematic of how complicit she has become with the crimes being committed around her, and draws attention to how only her voice is against the ruling class, and not her actions. If she rejects belonging to it, which she does as often as she can, she can find no acceptance in the black community of Gugulethu with either Mr. Thabane or Florence.

The idea of identity is not straightforward, says Canepari-Labib: "a concept such as identity can only make sense if understood not in terms of Cartesian philosophy, but as an ever-changing entity subjected to a continuous process of revision" (p. 206). Mrs. Curren is constantly looking for her identity throughout the book, but as her position and her experiences change, so too does her outlook. Her addressing of recalcitrant Vercueil changes as he does, her position in relation to him alters from reluctant and estranged care-giver ("This morning, bringing him coffee, I found him urinating into the drain, which he did without any appearance of shame" (p. 7)) to near lover ("He lay down at my back [...] The dog [...] settled between his legs and mine. Like Tristan's sword, keeping us honest" (p. 170)). Though she searches for who she is in relation to Mr. Thabane, for instance, she is a different person to him while he makes an example out of her in Gugulethu than she is when they are travelling in her car a moment later: "After what had passed I thought there was a line drawn between us. But he seemed to bear no grudge" (p. 92). Her inability to understand herself is a result of her trying to pin to a single location something that is transient and undeniable, but the traumatic events of Gugulethu and the raid on her house leave her unsure of what or who she is in relation to her surroundings. As a result, she is not even able to go through with her suicide when prompted, since the focus keeps returning onto what she is *not*, rather than onto what she is.

Mrs. Curren's self-immolation outside the houses of Parliament becomes a central point of what she defines as herself, until her refusal to go through with it roughly half way through the book. At that point, it becomes clear that in other ways this is not an appropriate protest. One can read her identity in this way as well, with what goes into and comes out of that decision. David Atwell calls this an act being performed "partly as a condemnation of the crimes of the state but also as a way of making her private death a public one, thus altering the scale on which it is valued" (*South Atlantic Quarterly*, p.

121). Her death as an individual is perhaps only important to the few people that are (as she discovers) just marginally connected to her life, while dying publicly as a protest gives herself a new meaning, and a new identity, in opposition to the state and its policies and crimes. As stated above, she discovers she is unable to do this, noting “how hard it is to kill oneself! One clings so tight to life!” (p. 109), and consents to have a private death after all. The urge to act independently of the state is again turned down.

Being trapped within the confines of an identity that contains the state within it becomes one of the main obstacles Mrs. Curren faces when trying to emancipate herself from her shame. Head reads *Age of Iron* in the following way: “The dynamic of the novel is that of personal dissolution involving Mrs Curren's relinquishment of all personal investment in life in South Africa, a movement which is necessary to generate a reverse process, the gradual acquisition of political enlightenment” (p. 129). This is a loaded notion. Here, the central event would be Gugulethu, after which Mrs. Curren says “Now my eyes are open and I can never close them again” and “I will never be warm again, I thought” (pp. 95, 99). In this she begins to see herself in the context of the struggles of the State of Emergency, as what she knows herself to be but does not want to accept, that is a privileged white woman in a safe suburb. While she is receptive to being apart from the state, even anticipatory, this would be the event that marks her detachment from the world around her, leading into what is seen as her political enlightenment.

More importantly, Head notes that while neither of the competing sides will accept her into their ranks or even tolerate her going through her ultimately useless motions, he acknowledges that her sense of disgust with the regime is present from the beginning, but through the course of the text, takes on “a new sense of urgency in the face of brutal first-hand experience” (p. 130). However, this reading seems to marginalize the final section of the novel, in which she spends most of the time bedridden, not heeding any call to action or any reaction to the state except to scream at Vercueil when he brings the television up while it is playing a patriotic program. There is no sense of urgency here, and in a way she seems more complicit than ever to exist in the situation she has been given by the state, no longer fighting, no longer having grandiose speeches about the need for heroics or the shame she is forced to live through. Finally, if the ending is to be taken as her death, then it is a silent one, held privately in her room, with no one around except her angel (of death) Vercueil and no fanfare or showy protest as she originally wanted. She does slowly come to accept her death, as Head says, realizing that she is not able to survive in a state in which, as Atwell puts it, “the struggle over ideas has ceased, and now either

the state or the people will prevail,” (South Atlantic Quarterly, p. 120). Her position as a former lecturer points to her affiliation with a less action-oriented approach at settling the problem before her, rather than that of the boys, which demands swift action immediately.

Mrs. Curren's position is subtly put in line with the boys she admonishes. Fiona Probyn draws a similarity between Mrs. Curren's rhetoric and that of Bheki and John. When they discuss burning down their schools, she expresses revulsion at the destruction of houses of learning. However, when speaking of her cancer, “she yearns to cleanse her body by fire, in the same way that John and Bheki fight to cleanse their part of the country by fire” (p. 223), pointing to the passage where she discusses her plans for suicide:

I have lived too long. Death by fire the only decent death left. To walk into the fire, to blaze like tow, to feel these secret sharers cringe and cry out too, at the last instant, in their harsh unused little voices; to burn and be gone, to be rid of, to leave, the world clean. Monstrous growths, misbirths: a sign that one is beyond one's term. This country too: time for fire, time for an end, time for what grows out of ash to grow. (p. 59)

The irony here is that, though she had decried the ends of their actions (p. 36), she seems not to have a problem with the methods, as she attempts to either purge herself of fire or use it to demonstrate her beliefs. She does in fact share something with these boys, and the cause they represent. We can directly compare the rhetoric used by the state leaders early on about how they will not bow to the threats they face (p. 9). However, this is not enough to endear herself to them, and though John comes around her house looking for help, knowing she will give it, he is unwilling to take in any of the speech she gives him about his wasting his life, concluding that it is a “waste of breath to preach prudence to this boy” (p. 131).

It is also possible that Mrs. Curren doesn't fully realize the implications of what she plans to do, as a small section of the narrative points out, a seeming non-sequiter: “‘Father, can't you see I'm burning?’ implored the child, standing at his father's bedside. But his father, sleeping on, dreaming, did not see” (p. 101). The break from first-person narration is quite noticeable, as she tries to see what she, the child, would look like from the outside, while also understanding the impact her likely protest would have upon her father (the state) which is leading up to her refusal to kill herself some pages later. However, it's also worth noting that the child is a boy, not a girl. In this way, the child is still her, but she has a thematic similarity to Michael K: though there are copious references to her mother, her father is seen as the state, which is harsh in the one case and neglectful in the other, depending on the race of his children. By switching the child to a boy in this section, however, we can see the child as a re-iteration of his father, an offspring that will one day grow up to usurp the position of father. Thus the

child, the miniature version of the father that is slowly growing to replace him, has been set on fire. Though the father may not have started the fire himself, he is unable to do anything to help, caught in his dream, and endangering his legacy as it burns to ash. Thus, between these two passages, we can see the similarities of Mrs. Curren to the two competing armies, yet the stark contrast between her and them as well, and how she can never become a part of either of them.

This change from the old system appears inevitable. Graham Huggan notes that there are several references in the text to the idea of entropy versus evolution, the state dying away while it struggles to adapt to what it must become, that the old must die so that the new can be born. Mrs. Curren's note of her daughter refusing to come back until those responsible for the current state "are hanging by their heels from the lamp-posts" illustrates this as well. The *Age of Iron*, as Huggan puts it, is

a further parody of Darwinian logic, [in which] the 'white liberal' is held up as a species which awaits – entreats – its own extinction, but which remains impelled, in spite of itself, by the will to survive; a species which wishes to perpetuate itself, but which also refuses to 'evolve' and, thus, paradoxically consents to its own destruction. [...] She demands, in short, her evolutionary rights; but at the same time, she is continually forced back on the recognition of her own arrested development. (p. 200)

The position of the white liberal is not only ineffectual, but what it engenders is hypocritical. With such competing motivations, Mrs. Curren's choice of suicide in a public place as a protest seems to be trying to cater to both of these, reaching for her destruction at the same time as her will to be heard. Her position becomes one of unjustifiable goals: to grow into a position within the country's hierarchy that will ultimately be heard, but to end the country's hierarchy at the same time and enjoy the after-effects of freedom. She cannot have both.

Keeping herself in an in-between state, not accepting identification with the regime but being unable to remove the masks the black community wears in front of her, Mrs. Curren is left waiting to die until the 'new' South Africa can come into being. This inability to evolve is further reinforced by the doll metaphor, and that of Mrs. Curren and her fellow South Africans as children. Specific attention is given to children outside this metaphor as well, referring to the colonists both times as children when looking into the past, both from Mrs. Curren's mother's dream and the voortrekker children, "Did we not have Voortrekkers, generation after generation of Voortrekkers, grim-faced, tight-lipped Afrikaner children, marching, singing their patriotic hymns, saluting their flag, vowing to die for their fatherland?" (p. 46). For Mrs. Curren and her mother can only focus on their childhoods, as she decides that "If each of us has a story we tell to ourself about who we are and where we come from, then that is

my story. That is the story I choose, or the story that has chosen me” (p. 110). A story of a childhood dream is her chosen origin, or the origin that has chosen her.

This characterization gives a picture of the children of the colonists that grew up to embody the state which appears in the text's present, during the State of Emergency. Interestingly, this characterization bears a striking similarity to John and Bheki, who could also be called “grim-faced, tight-lipped [...] children”, “singing their [...] hymns,” “vowing to die for their fatherland”. On the surface of it, we can find a fairly politically charged message, but digging a little deeper, it begins to appear that this is a further condemnation of the militant black townships' notions of what their life is worth in their struggle. If this is what the colonists' children have grown into, then a similar future awaits the children of this Age of Iron, the ones that are currently going off to war. Yet this notion that they must fight is one they were forced into by the ruling regime, and the regime can only blame themselves for this militant counteraction against them; if they hold their countrymen at a distance, put them under economic and social pressure, and persecute them, then they can expect a similar reaction. At the end of the book, the perversion and loss of childhood extends towards children not in the struggle, as Mrs. Curren has her mouth pried open by three vagrant children who have no mercy, forcing a stick into her mouth to see if she has any gold teeth (p. 145). The fallout from the struggle will rob not only the struggle's participants of their childhood and their crucial development, but the witnesses as well.

Liberal Humanism

Huggan further reads this depiction of childhood as not just the failure of parenthood, but as a symbol for Mrs. Curren as representative of her liberal-humanist ideals: “The humanist myths of the family, in particular, are mercilessly debunked: the innocence of childhood becomes as false in the context of contemporary South African society, as the nurturing role of parenthood or the reciprocity of family ties” (p. 194). We can already see the destruction of children and childhood, but it's also possible to see the entire family structure breaking down.

At the end of the second section, Mrs. Curren even refers to her complaint to the police as a lesson for them to “strengthen their self-control in the face of liberal-humanist posturing” (p. 78). Looking back to the medical officer of *Life & Times of Michael K*, we can see similarities between him and Mrs. Curren as their text's representatives of liberal-humanism. She says a lot about what should be done, but ultimately does little to differentiate herself from the ruling class she abhors. Huggan calls

Mr. Thabane a “Marxist ideologue” and Mrs. Curren a “former teacher of the classics – a ventriloquist of the dead” (pp. 194-195). We can use this dichotomy to understand their conversation about comradeship, in which Mr. Thabane tells Mrs. Curren “your voice is very tiny, very tiny and far away. I hope you can hear me” and she tells him of all the historical examples of his idea: “The Germans had comradeship, and the Japanese, and the Spartans. Shaka's impi too, I am sure” (pp. 136-137). Mrs. Curren sees it as an exchange of killing and death, which is precisely what she is unable to join or understand. She criticizes his grand slogans which he instructs the children to recite as they march into the revolution. Huggan takes particular note of Mrs. Curren's view of what she perceives as John's outlook on what awaits him if he continues to fight, the revolutionary dream of “Gore and glory; death and sex” (p. 131). However, this criticism as mollifying and ridiculing his motivations could just as easily reflect back on her, and her revulsion towards action that backs up her own stated convictions against the Afrikaner state. Can we blame John for being foolhardy when his alternative is, like Mrs. Curren, to do nothing and hope it turns out better? She attacks John's desire to see the world changed as he marches into battle, but it would be carried out with a much stronger impact than she could ever hope of having, even if she went through with her protest of self-immolation and public death.

“Caught between contradictory aspirations”, Huggan notes, “the desire for change and the desire to resist it - Mrs. Curren continues, in her letter, to rail against the very social injustices she is helping to sustain” (p. 204). He further notes that her situation gives her “an illusory disengagement”. In this case her death is the release of the current situation into the new South Africa, and though she hates it, like the cancer that is eating away at her bones, she resists it to hold on desperately to life. “There is not only death inside me,” she tells John, “There is life too. The death is strong, the life is weak. But my duty is to the life. I must keep it alive. I must” (p. 133). Slightly earlier she tells him that given only the option of Yes or No to determine if she will do something against the state instead of just talk, she would choose Yes. This is an insufficient answer, and it does not portray what she feels, and does not give voice to the words and ideas inside of her. Like the medical officer, she is carving out an in-between place for herself, where she does not have to feel complicit, but does not have to act either. Fortunately, part of the next generation (her daughter, which is seen as part of the future ruling party) is more moved to action, and this would seem to suggest that this in-between position will die off with Mrs. Curren.

The first moment when Mrs. Curren realizes she has more in common with the competing armies than she suspects is when Vercueil, the only person in the text not to be related to iron, as Derek

Attridge notes (South Atlantic Quarterly, p. 73), says to Mrs. Curren, “You are like iron too” (p. 68). It would seem strange that she is related to iron like all of the militant people in the text, even though she is not involved in a violent struggle. Iron in the text comes to symbolize war, hardship, weapons, strength of character and unwavering devotion to a cause and course of action, all something Mrs. Curren is not. She replies that something inside her breaks, and concludes that this means she isn't, in fact, iron, and the idea is never resolved: whether or not she was iron-like. Head takes this as an example of the theme of “personal dissolution”, that “her perceptions are changing”, and though she still holds onto “outmoded ideas” as she spars on the phone with Mr. Thabane over comradeship, later in a confession to Vercueil about the phone call, she “has come to realize that her opinions are irrelevant” (p. 137). It seems more likely that the idea that this could be the case frightens her, and that is why she ends the conversation quickly here, and chooses to continue to not take up arms against the state. It seems to be at this moment, this breaking point, that she is able to make a crucial decision about her character from here on, able to break out of her inaction if she so chooses. Instead, she chooses to remain as she was, afraid to act, and in choosing so, continuing to relegate herself to the muted sidelines as the revolution plays out.

Stephen Watson sees Mrs. Curren's position as stagnation, cursed to be “divorced from action and its fulfillment in action, thought itself becomes immobilised, petrified” (p. 29). He also shows this to be the case in *In the Heart of the Country*, as Magda, unable to make anything happen, is led to think endlessly and eventually turn her intellect in on itself, driving herself crazy. For *Age of Iron*, we see an inverse, where Mrs. Curren is unable to stop things from happening by her words or actions. Her thoughts have ceased to matter, and where she is able to think her way through these problems with clarity, the audacity of the action taking place around her without sufficient thought astounds her, and she has a difficult time coming to terms with it, and joining in. Likewise, the dissenting English intelligentsia in South Africa, having lost their role of importance along with their politicians after the elections of 1948, were

increasingly left out in the cold, hunched over that vacuum that had opened up within itself, one which was always threatening to implode [...it] grew to experience an isolation which many felt to be terminal. This was not merely an intellectual isolation. It was also that impasse encountered whenever the political sphere of life, in which people come together in pursuit of a common goal, is destroyed. (p. 27)

Thus their role between the Afrikaner political majority and the black populous majority was denied, and ceased to be. We can see this represented in the text, where Mrs. Curren keeps trying to put herself between the Afrikaners and the black population: trying to dissuade the oppressed from fighting, and

the Afrikaners from shooting John. This is very clear when she refuses to accept Thabane's condemnation without first adding her own take on it: "There are terrible things going on here. But what I think of them I must say in my own way" (*Iron*, p. 91). Why this hesitance? Is she trying to delay her answer in order to find a way not to play into his game? It seems she is attempting to make herself relevant once again. She wants to imprint her own brand of condemnation on the events. Moreover, she is saying that what they want must come from her, and not be invoked by Mr. Thabane, as asserting her place in the world. Again, she is rebuffed immediately by the surrounding crowd, as the man insults her words again, referring not only to what she is saying, but her assertion of her position in the face of such destruction around her.

The reading of the impossibility of the liberal-humanist position by Watson is described by Fiona Probyn as being as "exaggerated as it is verbally excessive" (p. 216). Probyn takes issue with the implication that the "English-speaking intelligentsia were somehow protected from the corruption of a dominant Afrikaner community by their exclusion", and makes sure to state that this was not the case. The position Mrs. Curren takes is one that forces the exclusion and isolation upon herself. This also becomes how she is able to keep the image of herself grounded. The dissenting liberal-humanist is not a role she was born into, but chose for herself. Does this preclude us from feeling sympathy for her? Though it can be argued that her beliefs led her in this direction, her impossible position is one that she has chosen for herself.

However, Probyn points out, that "Elizabeth's belief that her cancer is a manifestation of her complicity demonstrates her *lack* of isolation from the brutalities of power in South Africa" (p. 217). If she is isolated from the system as she wishes, then her body cannot be taken as a metaphor for the state, dying of its own internal ills. In fact, the intelligentsia is actually expressive of the symptoms of the state, manifesting the warring halves, and we can see Mrs. Curren suffering this attack, rather than that of the isolation from either side of the battle, the position she strives for and believes herself to be a part of. She continues to feel the cancer eat away at her, and the shame that induced it and continues to beleaguer every moment of her life: "Perhaps I should simply accept that that is how one must live from now on: in a state of shame. Perhaps shame is nothing more than the name for the way I feel all the time. The name for the way in which people live who would prefer to be dead" (*Iron*, p. 78). Taking her body as a symbol for the ills of the state, through this suffering of the symptoms of another, we can see how implicitly she is involved with those she detests, and how their pain is hers as well, and that if one dies, so must the other.

By the end, she comes to realize what is needed from her, but she is still unable to deliver. After lying next to Vercueil after John's death, she confesses to him, "What I had not calculated on was that more might be called for than to be good. For there are plenty of good people in this country. We are two a penny, we good and nearly-good. What the times call for is quite different from goodness. The times call for heroism" (p. 151). The need for heroism, it should be noted, is born out of her study of the classics, as she says shortly afterward, "The hero, that antique naked figure" (*ibid.*). This seems to be a call on the liberal-humanists to stand up and act which, as Canepari-Labib notes (p. 270), is ultimately fruitless. Mrs Curren herself remarks "heroism. A word that, as I speak it, sounds foreign to my lips. I doubt I have ever used it before, even in a lecture" (p. 151). There is another instance of finding a call to arms over foreign words in this text, oddly criticized by Mrs. Curren as well:

"*Freedom or death!*" shout Bheki and his friends. Whose words? Not their own" (p. 149). Are the two so different? Can we look at her looking down on Bheki and his friends' slogans any differently than we can her call to heroism? Or is this nullified by her insistence, in the same confession, that she has no authority with which to decry these ideas? This seems to be the only thing she has left, her final call to arms, for those that are ready to take those arms up. For her, there is no more fighting, as after this revelation, Mrs. Curren quite literally just goes home and stays there. For the rest of the text, she remains content to return to hating the state's broadcasts on TV, reflecting the first section, but now doing so without the strength to stand up out of her bed and resist them herself.

By the ending of the third section, we can see Mrs. Curren bedridden, and this comes as the culmination of her slow acceptance of her death. Head says that this "advancement is based on her increasing sense of her own insignificance, which becomes a kind of atonement for her complicity with the dying colonial order", further stating that this unimportance is why she does not set fire to herself outside the Houses of Parliament, which he calls "an egotistical plan" (pp. 130, 131). The ending, then, can be seen as her choosing a private death as opposed to a public one.

Curren's Classical World

Mrs Curren's previous profession as a classics lecturer shows itself as she readily alludes to Marcus Aurelius (p. 144), mentions that her sickness is "sent by Saturn" (p. 59), and that she is "standing on the river-bank [of the Styx] awaiting my turn" (p. 164). Like *Disgrace's* David Lurie, she sees things through the goggles of the classics, most visibly when she talks to John in the hospital. "If you had been in my Thucydides class, I went on, 'you might have learned something about what can happen to

our humanity in time of war” (p. 73). At this point, nothing could sound further from John's position, and he ignores her and her lesson. The interest in beauty and the joys of life that appears in much classical poetry is precisely what is missing, ironically, though it is not exclusive to ancient times. One might also hearken back to stories of Achilles and Hector, great warriors leading armies, and see what John would have taken from the classics had he read them.

This insistence on older texts has led Watson to note that “through language itself, through those conventional representations which come to be accepted as either 'natural' or 'universal', that we are colonised as much as by any overt act of physical conquest” (p. 18). We can also see Mrs. Curren as colonized by the Greco-Romans, repeating what they have said, their lessons and ideas, and applying it to the world around her, attempting to make herself be heard against the resistance she inevitably encounters.

Several classical allusions appear throughout the text, such as her reciting Virgil and telling Vercueil that if he doesn't mail her letter, in this case equated to her burial, she will have “100 years of misery” (p. 176). She also refers to herself as Circe (p. 77), and Canepari-Labib finds further references to the underworlds of Homer's *Odyssey* and Dante's *La divina commedia* (*Old Myths*, p. 124).

It's ironic, given her position in the world, that she should point to the classics, which come from a part of the world which has nothing to do with her or her situation, as a way of moderating what is going on, as a cautionary tale, as she describes her class to John. Can those fighting for the future of the southern tip of Africa look back to Europe for their morals, their lessons in humanity? Or is this too a method employed by the regime and the white dissenters alike? What grounds can she have to refer to the classics in a struggle to return Africa to its rightful owners? This potentially has a dire outlook for the desire to pull down the state, as the dissenting whites have still not learned the lesson that it's not so much a fight for the majority Africans to have majority rule as it is a struggle to return Africa to its native people.

Of course, we can also look at this the other way around, that Mrs. Curren is using the Afrikaners' reliance on the morals of Europe against them, and is choosing to show to them that their ideology is false for even those reasons, notwithstanding the above. The idea that she and the state must not just step aside but die out completely to make room for a better nation and better governance supports this view; she, thinking like they do, must depart when they do, for the same reasons. We can then read her suicide not as a protest, but a model to be followed. Thus, there is all the more reason to

do it outside the Houses of Parliament.

Coetzee himself has said that this failing of hers to escape her position of isolation was a major part of her character: “Elizabeth Curren brings to bear against the voices of history and historical judgment that resound around her two kinds of authority: the authority of the dying and the authority of the classics. Both of these authorities are denied and even derided in her world: the first because hers is a private death, the second because it speaks from long ago and far away” (*Doubling the Point*, p. 250). This rhetoric is perfectly suited to her because in the political and cultural situation of South Africa between the dates the text claims to be written, it too is ultimately unimportant and irrelevant.

The title of the book is itself taken from one of the texts a classical scholar would have no doubt read. Though she herself refers to Marcus Aurelius, several commentators have looked to Hesiod's *Works & Days* to understand the source. Describing the five ages of man as created by the gods in five separate ages, the Iron Age appears to represent the uproarious times under Empires, as well as when those empires will be broken up. Hesiod describes it thusly:

Not a day goes by
a man doesn't have some kind of trouble.
Nights too, just wearing him down. I mean
the gods send us terrible pain and vexation [...]
fathers won't get along with their kids anymore,
Nor guests with hosts, nor partner with partner,
And brothers won't be friends the way they used to be.
Nobody'll honor their parents when they get old
But they'll curse them and give them a hard time [...]
They'll start taking justice in their own hands,
Sacking each other's cities. (205-220)

And we can see parallels for almost every line within the text itself. The overarching theme is the breakdown of humanity, kindness, and morality. No reason is given for the people within this age acting as they do, which Huggan calls an “apocalyptic parable” (p. 192). With so much similarity between the two, the parallel between Hesiod's poem and the ruling apartheid state is a small jump.

Mrs. Curren mentions the cyclical ages progressing through time (p. 46). Huggan notes that by “subscribing to this 'cosmic' view of time, Mrs Curren hopes to justify her own political quietism” (p. 198). As history is only repetitive according to this, and the same dramas are destined to be played out over and over again in a pre-determined cycle, she can see herself as only playing her part, acting well rather than not at all. He also notes that Hesiod's gospel of work is visible in Mrs. Curren, at least as she prescribes it for other people. “How can you lie around and do nothing all day?” she asks Vercueil (p. 7) and tries to give him a job on two occasions (pp. 10, 18). She even goes so far as to scold him

later on, saying to him, “In the South Africa of the future, everyone will have to work, including you. You may not like the prospect, but you had better prepare yourself for it” (pp. 65-66). However, like other ideas she espouses, when the same requirement is turned back on her, she cannot live up to her own standard:

When Florence went off at the beginning of the month, I assured her I could cope with the housework. But of course I let everything slide, and soon a sour, clammy odour pervaded the upstairs [...] Now I had to follow shamefacedly after her as she took stock. Hands on hips, nostrils flaring, spectacles gleaming, she surveyed the evidence of my incompetence. Then she set to work [...] ‘I don’t know what I would do without you.’ But of course I do know. I would sink into the indifferent squalor of old age. (p. 33)

Here we see a bald contradiction, and not her first. If she has been colonized by the Greco-Romans, she has not incorporated the lesson as fully as she expects the others around her to do. Again, we can see Vercueil standing outside her realm of control, being rewarded for doing no work (as he receives welfare) and remaining, as Attridge writes, impervious “to the logic of an economy of labor and reward, service and indebtedness” (*South Atlantic Quarterly*, p. 62), and thus we see that she is unable to affect him in any way, whether by employing him or trying to understand his life.

The Quixotic Idea

There is an entirely different way of reading this text, which Patrick Hayes looks at in great detail. He claims that “Both Elizabeth Curren and Don Quixote are old-fashioned fools confronting a reality that, conceived metafictionally in terms of literary genre, has no time for them and their assumptions” (p. 134). While it would seem the figure of Mrs. Curren lends itself more readily to tragedy than comedy, there is a lot of evidence to suggest that she is simply seeing things incorrectly, trying to shape the world around her to an ideal that may not fit it. If we look at her as Don Quixote, and Vercueil as Sancho Panza, we see a pair safely isolated from the rest of the world gone mad around them, unable to get involved in it without altering it fundamentally. As Quixote may race misguided towards a windmill as he sees his villain, Mrs. Curren may give a speech or a confession of the incorrectness of taking action against the regime she lives under, which is found to be misguided for her time, and only her companion is willing to give her credence, which, like Quixote, she must win from him.

We see a similar reference in both *Age of Iron* and in *Don Quixote*, as Don Quixote discusses his desire to inhabit the “Golden Age” rather than his age of iron: “Happy time, and fortunate ages were those, where on our ancestors bestowed the title of *golden*! not because gold (so much prized in this our iron age) was gotten in that happy time without any labours, but because those which lived in

that time knew not these two words, 'thine' and 'mine'; in that holy age all things were common.” (De Cervantes, p. 130, my emphasis). The reference to Hesiod is unmistakeable. Further, Mrs. Curren is also willing herself into a 'softer' age: “How long, how long before the softer ages return in their cycle, the age of clay, the age of earth?” (p. 46). The large difference here is that Mrs. Curren seems unable to do anything to spur on the passage of time, and is carried along in it, whereas Don Quixote takes a significantly more active role, shaping the world around him as he sees fit (albeit mistakenly). Given how prone Mrs. Curren is to hypocrisy and how much she relies on a world that may not be applicable to her situation (Europe to Africa), it may be worth questioning how valuable her advice is in the first place, or if she is trying to change her environment to one that cannot exist in that time and place.

There are several more instances in the text where we can see Vercueil making a fool of himself, or providing comic relief, spinning and playing with the children early on (“It was on the verge of becoming a game” (p. 35)), or interrupting a heavy silence after one of Mrs. Curren's confessions to ask to borrow ten rand (p. 78), to offering to get her drunk when she confesses to him again, heading off her complaints against it by saying it's a different kind of liquor (p. 115). Finally, when he dances to the national anthem at the end of the text, Vercueil is not only making a fool of himself, but by doing so, ridiculing the song (“he danced, unmistakably danced, to music I never thought could be danced to” (p. 166)). Mrs. Curren even calls her old Hillman car by the name of Don Quixote's horse: “Up Boyes Drive, the car was labouring now, willing but old, like Rocinante. I gripped the wheel tighter, urging her on” (p. 16). As Hayes states, however, “it is by playing with the Quixotic figure of a fool, in a continual movement between the comic and the serious, that Coetzee's text makes its own unique singular negotiation of the demands made upon the genre of the novel by the age of iron it occupies.” (p. 134). Coetzee is running two themes at once, the foolish nature of Mrs. Curren and Vercueil and the lack of their understanding and position within the world they occupy, being too wrapped up in their own fantasies to interact with the world in any meaningful way, like Quixote himself.

There is also a game of counter-genre being played here. Don Quixote is unable to justify the romantic world of his books with the reality of his surroundings, and De Cervantes combines both romantic and picaresque elements into his novel to express the dual vision. The same can be said of Coetzee, trying to combine the ancient world of the classics with that of present day South Africa and its own history and revolutionaries. While De Cervantes was aiming for comedic effect, Coetzee seems to be saying that there is no way to justify what the dissenting English intelligentsia envisions for their nation with the South Africa that is beginning to fight back on its own.

The relation of Mrs. Curren and Don Quixote works to underline the significant separation Mrs. Curren, like many of Coetzee's characters, are unable to bridge as they "(Michael K being the exception here) beat against the shackles of their historical position in vain" (Watson, 23). She is trapped in the classification as reluctant coloniser, complicit by default with the ruling class, but also as historical fool, born far too late for her situation, and unable to see the world she believes in and unable to believe the world she sees in front of her eyes.

Section IV

"The unwholesome vagrant is cast in the role of ironic Messiah," Graham Huggan writes, asking, "Is he also the harbinger of a new age? The possibility is not ruled out, but as the Hesiod myth implies, there is no certainty as to what the future might hold" (p. 203). So does Vercueil come to save Mrs. Curren or usher in her passing, and with her, the Age of Iron? We can say both, as she will continue to live on in her daughter via the medium of delivered letters (p. 120), but his final embrace, from which "there was no warmth to be had", becomes the end of the book, her letters, and seemingly her life (p. 181). This occurs as she struggles to make her private life at least a little less private, inviting Vercueil further into her house as she loses Florence and John, and giving out her confessions to her daughter far off in the northwest. Head states that this ending "is not entirely inconsistent with the voice of a narrator dependent on pain-killing drugs, moving on from hallucinatory dreams to death; and the idea that Vercueil is an angel is one of hers", stating that he has "no gift of redemption to bestow" (p. 130). She may be left with only the vagrant, but it is also possible that she is only left with herself, unable to find anyone who will listen to or care about her, and once again isolated just before the end.

The text ends where it began, with an embrace of death. From the first page, we hear Mrs. Curren taking the news of her impending death to her heart, when she has no one else: "The news was not good, but it was mine, for me, mine only, not to be refused. It was for me to take in my arms and fold to my chest and take home, without headshaking, without tears" (p. 3). Comparatively, the final lines of the text regard Vercueil embracing her: "He took me in his arms and held me with mighty force, so that the breath went out of me in a rush", giving "no warmth" (p. 181). Right up to the end we see her desire to connect, but beyond changing the scope of what she demands of herself and the actors of the time, not accepting the ideas of others. In this way we can say that she has still failed to connect with those around her on an intellectual level.

Coetzee himself states, "In the life of each of us, Thanatos of course eventually wins, and in the

life of Elizabeth Curren that is what happens. But when one looks back over the book as a whole, I would hope the outcome is less certain” (quoted in Dooley, p. 184). Certainly, if she dies along with the state, many who would have died like John and Bheki, the revolutionaries, will be spared. Canepari-Labib reads the ending as Mrs. Curren finding “a sort of peace” and writes that it “hints at the possibility that harmony might still be achieved in the name of a common humanity” (p. 277). That two such different characters are able to bridge their gap and find solace together, completing each other at least on some level that they're able to acknowledge after their time spent apart from each other, shows that there may be hope for the complicit in some small way, that their efforts may finally be acknowledged, even if they were ill-advised and ineffectual.

Vercueil's name has been noted as a play on several negative words: “In French [...] his name suggests a combination of 'ver' (worm) and 'cercueil' (coffin); in Afrikaans a conflation of 'verkul' (to cheat) and 'verskuil' (to hide)” (Huggan, p. 202). Despite those possibilities appearing in various parts of the book, however, he displays very few of these qualities during this section, and if anything, proves to be a calming, soothing, and care-giving supporter of Mrs. Curren at the end, and the only one she seems to have left.

Conclusion

Like Magda and Michael, Mrs. Curren lacks any connection to the world around her, and like the first, is unable to establish meaningful, lasting connections. Mr. Vercueil is the only one, if he is there at all, and helps her slip into death, ending her struggle to endure the Age of Iron. Her isolation emerges in a socio-political role, becoming emblematic of those in South Africa during the State of Emergency who do not want to fight, and who may look so far as to believe in another avenue of action to finding a solution to their problems.

Intellectually, Mrs. Curren is unable to find another like her, or one who is even interested in listening to her. Her removal from the stage is both indicative of the crumbling of her times and the removal of the liberal-humanist intellectual in her corner of history; as a product of a particular time and tutelage, she finds herself no longer needed, and when she relinquishes her life, she is able to allow South Africa to enter its new stage, and possibly to bring her daughter home.

But more than that, she, like many in the world, wish for a better time to come, as they see all of the problems plaguing their time, and the passage of the Age of Iron, as defined by Hesiod. Speaking of her and Michael K, Coetzee says to Joanna Scott, “My fidelity is ultimately to them and for their

unique plights, not to any grand historical trajectory they may be seen as belonging in” (quoted in Dooley, p. 61). At the forefront is not just the isolation of pieces of society, but of her, the individual that is made to suffer. The cost of war, revolution, and colonialism is calculated in those small units.

Conclusion

The first literary journal in South Africa, the aptly titled *South African Journal*, launched in 1824, began as the founders “conceived their venture as a joint English-Dutch publication, albeit with separate editions in each language appearing bimonthly” (McDonald, p. 3). While they claimed that serving both languages was chosen to cater to both communities, this divided 'culture of letters' began, as Coetzee would later say of the CNA Award, to advocate two “national literatures” of South Africa. One was in English, the other in Afrikaans. The award, the highest in the South African literary realm, at the time catered to two very different audiences. Afrikaans literature was dominated by different themes, according to Coetzee, those of the Afrikaans audience, “national struggle for survival, independence, unity, hegemony, whatever” (Coetzee, quoted in McDonald, p. 304). But could this exist alongside books in another language, also declared national, which struggled to deny their illegitimacy as national literature?

Ultimately, as both Afrikaans and English literatures were based on the established order, Coetzee began to find a way out of his position by saying that his could not be considered national literature any more than English can be said to be a native language of Africa. Not seeing himself as belonging to a national literature, he attempted to define writing from his position and that of others in his situation as pieces of writing by those “no longer European, not yet African” (*White Writing*, p. 11). There is no language, he says, “in which Africa naturally expresses itself, that is to say, a language in which there is no split between signifier and signified, and things are their names,” (p. 9). This hypothetical language is the one desired by those wishing to assume a cultural identity within Africa and yet claim the continent as their own in their culture of letters. The requirement is impossible, and so the qualification remains unfulfilled.

Coetzee seems to be comfortable with this position, if not in its fairness to the actually indigenous peoples of South Africa, then at least from a writing perspective. He distances himself from not only European writing and culture, but also claims he does not belong to Africa. Does taking this position eliminate his authority? From where does he speak? Are the separations rendered by the apartheid government still present? Do they still preclude him from belonging? How are we to answer Elizabeth Curren as she writes to her daughter,

It would be easier for you, I know, if the story came from someone else, if it were a

stranger's voice sounding in your ear. But the fact is, there is no one else. I am the only one. I am the one writing: I, I. So I ask you: attend to the writing, not to me. If lies and pleas and excuses weave among the words, listen for them. Do not pass them over, do not forgive them easily. Read all, even this adjuration, with a cold eye. (*Iron*, pp. 95-96)

Can we reply to the text, "I reject your position, as not a native of Africa, nor one of true suffering"? Do we need a fulfillment of those conditions to listen to the writing being offered? Does this voice, by virtue of speaking, command authority?

To the last question, we must conclude yes. We cannot reply to the text in that way, requiring it to be of one position in order to be heard. While the voice between coloniser and colonised would be easiest to categorize if it came from one of the two sources of the conflict to which we attribute inherent value (the colonized and oppressed for example), this view is a product of the system which divided the population in the first place. To say that a particular perspective has less worth because it does not belong to a particular class is misguided, and makes a conclusion before the evidence is heard. Yes, the view from the underside of the apartheid regime is valuable, but if we are to understand the system, it is equally vital to hear from all involved parties.

Even if we take this isolated view, the position of the "unwilling colonizer" is a part of that system, created by the system, which cannot be ignored. Even if it is a niche, it is a niche worth understanding, through which the outsider and the insider can obtain a wider appreciation of the system it is written from. If the goal is to gain a full understanding, then it cannot be left out. It shares both the advantages and the disadvantages of identity, race versus association, and enters into questions that are worth pursuing, questions of language, of identity, of relation and connection, and of control.

If we do not take this isolated view, and do not cut up the literary population into its constituent parts, we still find authority in this writing. Perhaps it is not as national literature, but it is a product of South Africa, and the South Africa of that time. "All I can say," Coetzee said of himself, "is that I do not expect my countrymen to devote many pages to me when in a hundred years' time they sit down to write the history of writing in this country" (Wood, p. 195). This sentiment is quite possibly born out of the same sense of exclusion he feels himself to be deserving of, that though he is a product of South Africa, he cannot belong to its most highly regarded literature.

It cannot be said, however, that the country does not embrace Coetzee as their own literary star. May 2011 saw the first literary festival based around his work held, affectionately named "Disgraceland" (Baker & David). Certainly the reference to ("The King") Elvis Presley's Graceland is not accidental. English may not be a valid language for a national literature anywhere in Africa in

Coetzee's eyes, nor in the eyes of many others. Though he has come under heavy criticism (most notably for books like *Disgrace*), his fellow South Africans celebrate him in his native country as one of their own.

The Immorality Act of 1949, preventing interracial intercourse, and the Prohibition of Mixed Marriages Act of 1950, were the original acts under Grand Apartheid which ensured isolation of people. These, along with the Group Areas Act of 1950, which sectioned off areas for populations by race, constructed the system of isolation which dominated the way people interacted with each other, and with whom they were able to live. Finally, the Population Registration Act of the same year, regimenting all of the people in South Africa into defined races, formalized and cemented the way people understood each other: first by race, then by everything else (MacKinnon, pp. 183-190; Lester, Nel, & Binns, p. 171). In some instances, the last Act split up families, deeming race to be more important. It had to be the removal of these acts which ended apartheid, and tried to end the separations and gaps between the people that lived under that rule, but before that could be done, we saw in books like the ones covered in this thesis the suffering they were causing. This suffering is indeed the case with many other characters in Coetzee's oeuvre, and those of others as well, who attempted to draw attention to these gaps, and the voices these gaps were silencing and removing from the system, ensuring their voices would not be heard.

As we have seen, Magda was unequipped from the beginning to cope with the problems she was born into. She was not able to overcome her position, and suffered the consequences of her father's system, or rather, the system her father held in place. The hierarchy of distance fell apart around her, and she remained isolated for the rest of her days, not only from her family and those that could have been her friends, but the world that was moving on outside of her and her chosen realm. Michael K knew that the times did not need defeating, but surviving. Should he keep himself out of the way, out of all the camps, he would find his own means of victory. His method of survival was a way of waiting until the divided system he was escaping from collapsed, should it ever collapse. Finally, Elizabeth Curren acknowledged time and again that she could not survive the system she could not escape. The final thing held at a distance from her was the new world, born out of the ashes of the old. The old world needed to die, and her with it, for the new one to be born, and all of the things within it she wanted enacted. She would ultimately not see her daughter again until what needed to be swept away was gone.

In this thesis I have shown many different ways distance is easily created within the works of

Coetzee, the painful consequences and power games that ensue, and how difficult it is to eliminate. It could be that these characters require this distance to function, and yet are destined to struggle against it eternally. Against the few benefits, I have shown the many vibrant difficulties and pains it can result in.

I have also shown how integral an understanding of isolation, separation, and distance is to fully understanding these three texts. Using this as a starting point, one can move through the field of psychology to deconstruct the characters and understand what motivates them, but also thematically how they are wrapped up in the legacy of a system that takes bias and unevenness as law and applies it habitually and carelessly against the oppressed it rests on the shoulders of, pressing them down. This can be via something as grand as ethnic background, something as tangible as skin color, or even something as simple as age, in the case of Mrs. Curren, or the words one chooses, in the case of Magda, or how one chooses to live life, as in the case of Michael.

In the current South Africa, the gaps are still there, but the borders are fuzzier, less distinct. The question of authority is now on the majority, and they have the opportunity to prove themselves. There are still voiceless wandering the streets, but they now have a significantly larger opportunity to make themselves heard one day, not through the filter of another, but from their own selves. They may be unhelped but are also unhindered, and are free to express themselves in whichever language they choose. Their stories finally can and will be heard.

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